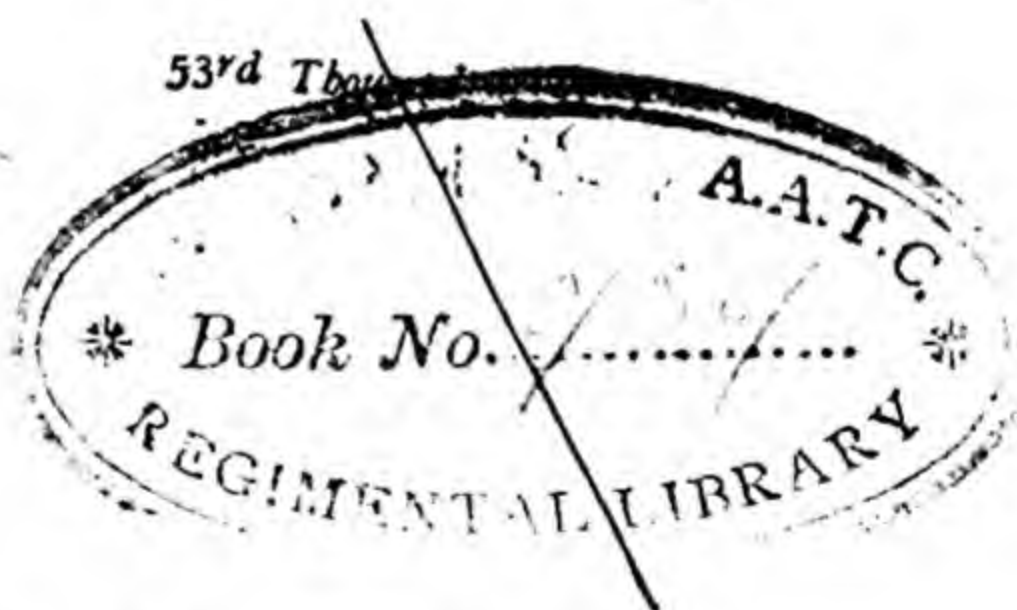


THEY CRACKED HER GLASS SLIPPER

by
GERALD BUTLER

Author of
"Kiss the Blood off My Hands", "Their Rainbow had Black Edges"



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CHAPTER I

FIRST TIME I SAW HIM, I KNEW THERE WAS SOME PART OF HIM that fitted some part of me. It was just that kind of feeling.

My taxi was caught by the traffic lights outside the entrance to the stadium. He came out like a whippet, with two or three men after him, just a few yards behind. Just as the traffic lights changed, and my taxi started to move forward again, he made a dive for it, landing on the running-board, opened the door, ducked inside, and slammed the door behind him.

"Drive straight on, quickly!" he gasped.

His breath was coming in deep, heavy spurts, and it was clear that he had thrown everything into a desperate sprint. The taxi-driver was looking round through his window, keeping the cab moving slowly, wondering whether to stop or go on, waiting for me to give him the sign what to do. Without waiting to think it out, I leant quickly forward, slid the glass panel to one side, and told the driver: "Go straight on, as fast as you can. Forget the address I gave you. Just drive anywhere—but quick!"

"Right you are, lady," he said, and the taxi picked up speed, got into top gear, and went bowling forward.

I slid the glass panel shut again, and turned to look at the man beside me. He was twisted round, with his eyes looking intently out of the little back window. He might have had the cab to himself for all the notice he was taking of me. He went on looking, straining to see back along the road. Suddenly he broke away from the window and turned to me.

"I was afraid they might pick up a car. But all they've got is another taxi. With the start we've got, that makes the betting slightly odds on us."

He put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a bundle of money. From it he took a five-pound note, and stuffed the rest back.

To him at that moment, I clearly did not represent a very important part of the proceedings. He was treating the cab as if he had hired it himself in the ordinary way, and as if it were quite a normal thing to find someone inside it.

"You don't seem——" I started, but he cut me off short.

"Wait a minute," he said, "I must see to things first."

Then he leant forward and slid the glass panel aside and spoke to the driver in a calm, clear voice.

"I am a detective-inspector in plain clothes," he said. "The mob that I have been watching for jumped to the conclusion that I am a member of a rival gang. They are after me now in another taxi not far behind. You must help me to give them the slip if you possibly can. If they catch up with me, find out that I am a detective, it will end all my chances of ever finding out the information I am after. You have my permission to go as fast as you can. Twist and turn round the side streets. Don't worry about traffic lights. Don't worry about the speed limit. If you are pinched I will make it all right for you. Just to encourage you . . ." he pushed the five-pound note through the opening, held it in front of the driver for a second, then stuffed it into the driver's breast pocket, ". . . here's a little reward which I hope you will deserve. Now get a move on."

The driver, impressed and excited, had been putting on speed even while the man was talking to him. Now the man shut the panel again, took another careful look through the little back window, and sat down beside me.

"I suppose I ought to apologize," he said.

I looked back at him.

"Please don't dream of it," I said. "Everyone's welcome in my taxi. Don't trouble to knock, I always tell them. Just walk right in and tell the driver where you want to go!"

I said it with an acting voice, but the effect was ruined because the taxi chose that moment to turn a sharp corner, and the sudden movement flung me over and I went crashing on to his lap.

"Sorry!" I said, involuntarily, as I struggled up again and tried to get my dignity back.

"Don't mention it!" he acted back. "Everyone's welcome on my lap. Don't trouble to get up again, I always tell them."

I flashed my head round at him, annoyed at his making fun of what I had meant to be sarcastic. But I didn't let off at him. There was an amused little twist on his face, and his eyes were laughing; not laughing at me, but just laughing. I had to smile back. Then he laughed out loud.

"Madam," he said, putting on a gay, exaggerated courtesy, "you see before you a fawn snatched from the jaws of the wolves, a harmless fly whisked safely away from the foot that would have trodden on him. You behold a mortal whose promising career would probably have been coshed on the head but for your tender kindness and assistance. If he has not the manners to thank you—surely the gods will!"

The moment he had stopped speaking, before I could

laugh or say anything, he turned away again and looked out of the window at the back. He frowned.

"Life is too cruel," he said. "I believe they've got a better taxi than yours. Have you got any beer bottles—revolvers—Mills bombs? No?" He broke off and leaned forward to slide the partition back and speak to the driver again. This time his voice was brittle and curt.

"You'll have to do better than this! Put your foot down and keep it there! Remember this is a police job."

The driver muttered to himself, and the taxi rattled and bounced about as it raced through the streets. I had lost all track of where we were, but the traffic seemed to be getting thicker, so I guessed he was working inwards towards the centre of London. The tyres kept screaming as he wrenched the cab round other vehicles, often overtaking on the inside, rushing for gaps so close that my muscles were all taut waiting for a crash. I caught sight of people turning to stare at the crazy way we were tearing through the traffic. Horns were honking and drivers were shouting at us. But still the man in the cab with me, looking out of the back window every few seconds, was shouting to the driver to go faster and faster.

"I can't go no faster," the driver was saying. "If we go on like this much longer, I'll smash my cab up or run over somebody or something."

Ahead of us was a straight stretch of road, clear of traffic for about three hundred yards. And at the end of that there was a solid stodge of cars and buses, barely moving at all. It filled the whole of our half of the road, and the other half was filled with traffic coming from the other direction.

"Drive up behind them," he said to the driver. "Try to nose yourself into a gap, so that you can get into the middle of the block. I shall slip out of the cab—but don't slow down for me. With luck they won't see me duck. Whatever happens, keep on with the traffic."

He turned quickly to me.

"Thanks for the lift," he said. "The driver's paid plenty. Get him to take you back where you wanted to go." He jerked his head towards the road behind us. "Those mugs won't interfere with you when they find you're alone."

He took one more quick glance through the back window. The brakes were making the tyres squeal as we came shooting up behind the slowly moving traffic block. The left-hand and the right-hand lines were longer than the middle. There was a gap, the length of a couple of cars, in the middle. The driver shoved the cab in there, and as it slid in, the man

opened the left-hand door, stepped on to the running-board, and shut the door again. The cars were still moving forward, and I felt something tear at me inside as I saw him jump forward between two other cars on the left and brush between them as they went forward. You couldn't have done it once in a hundred times, but he managed it somehow. And then something happened to me. In some kind of way I went crazy, and I didn't know what I was doing. All I knew was, I was opening the door and jumping, and landing sprawled out on the road with the wheels rolling all round me, and my skirt heaven knows where. And then I was up again, giddy and still not knowing, and scrambling through the traffic block the way he had gone. And then, just by the corner ahead, there was a taxi starting to draw away from the kerb, and I saw those laughing eyes of his taking a fleeting glance out of the window.

Still not knowing, I ran like I never ran before, streaking through the people on the pavement and knocking one flying. And just before I bust myself, I reached the cab as it gathered speed, and jumped on the step and clung on.

"'Ere—what's the game?" the driver demanded, but the curt voice came from inside the cab. "Drive on," it said.

A hand came through the window, and took hold of my wrist in a grip that felt like a metal clamp. Then the door opened, and another hand came through the open door, and the first hand left go, and I was lugged into the cab. The door slammed behind me.

I flopped down on the seat, gasping for breath. The man was at the back window, but after looking carefully for nearly a minute, he told the driver: "No hurry after all. Just drive on normally."

Then he turned and looked at me.

"As the driver so clearly put it," he said, "what is the game?"

I was getting my breath back now. I dusted some of the muck from the road off my skirt, and tried to put my legs so that the tear in the knee of my stocking didn't show.

"Same game as yours," I answered.

"Meaning?"

"Just taking rides in other people's taxis," I said.

He frowned at me.

"You might have given those mugs the scent," he said.

"I didn't, did I?"

He took another glance out of the back, and shook his head.

"No. But it was just a fluke that you didn't. What was

the idea? Were you scared they might do something to you?"

"Not particularly," I said. It was difficult to know what to tell him, what to say. I think I blushed a bit.

"Have you got a line?" His eyes weren't laughing now. They were sharp, searching eyes now.

"A line? What do you mean?"

He looked at me hard; ran his eyes down me and up again. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Where do you go from here?" he asked. "What *was* the idea of tagging after me?"

"I don't quite know," I said lamely. "I just felt ~~X~~. I just felt we were in something together, and I didn't want to drop out, that's all."

He laughed, a little at first, but then he put back his head and enjoyed it. Then he looked at me with the smiling eyes again.

"Well," he said, "it's all over now. Nobody's following us. This is now just a sober, ordinary journey to nowhere in particular. I suggest we celebrate our sensational escape from the wolves with a drink somewhere, and then we can both go back to our respective bye-byes." He leaned forward to talk to the driver. "Whereabouts are we? Then go to Piccadilly, Percy's Bar."

As we drove along, I began to feel very foolish, and I was glad when the cab stopped. We got out, and he paid off the cab and we went into the bar. It was a smart bar, with tables dotted around, and a few high stools. I chose the stools, and said I would have gin and lime.

He gave me a cigarette, and lighted one himself. The conversation was completely stuck, but I could feel he was summing me up all the time. When the drinks came it was better.

"To you," he said. He could put on a lot of charm when he wanted to.

"And you. It must be fun living your way," I said.

He questioned with his forehead.

"My way? Don't tell me you know my life story," he mocked.

"I mean, being a detective must be exciting."

For a moment he looked bewildered. Then he said: "Did you think I was?"

"But . . . that's what you said you were."

He chuckled.

"How complimented Scotland Yard would feel," he said.

"I only told the cabby that to make him get a move on. I often find it saves a lot of argument."

It's funny how the bottom can drop right out of your

thoughts, just because something you believed, and quickly built a lot of framework round in your mind, turns out to be so silly that the very idea makes someone laugh. Maybe it depends who laughs.

"What *do* you do, then?" I wished my voice had not gone so flat.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That's a great big question," he said. His eyes went down at me. "Your knee's bleeding."

I looked down, touched it with my hand, and shook my head.

"No—it's dried. It's all right." I crossed my legs to cover it up.

"Look out! Look what you're doing!" he suddenly rasped out at me and pointed to my hand.

I looked down quickly, looked back up at him, looked down again at my hand. I couldn't think what was the matter. I couldn't think what he was so excited about.

"Your glass! Put your glass down quickly," he said.

Bewildered, I set my glass down on the counter.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Your glass and your cigarette!" he said. "You were holding them both in the same hand! That's the worst bad-luck omen I ever knew. It's a crazy thing to do."

I gaped at him, as if I could hardly believe what I was hearing, and then, I just couldn't help it, I burst out laughing.

"Of all the superstitious people!" I exclaimed.

He grinned. "I have to kiss the goddess or she won't kiss me," he said.

I noticed him watching me quite anxiously, and he looked relieved when I picked up my glass in the hand that wasn't holding the cigarette.

"D'you know"—he opened up as if he were going to give away a great new thought—"you happened along with your cab at a very convenient moment for me this evening."

I smiled to him.

"Maybe I'm good luck," I said.

"Maybe you are." He raised his glass. "I drink to the hope that your lucky taxi will always be just where I need it most."

"Only the taxi?" It was just a thought out loud. He didn't pick it up.

"What would have happened if you hadn't got away from those men?" I asked him.

He looked up at the ceiling, dreamily.

"Perhaps I'd have been in a gutter by now. Perhaps I'd

have had a pretty slash down the cheek. Perhaps I'd have . . ." he broke off and shook his head. "What's the good of guessing? You're asking another of your big questions."

The light kind of bantering way he talked did not cover up what he said. I looked at him carefully.

"Was it really that kind of a do?"

"It looked as if it might be," he answered. "They were pretty wild, and they didn't look the gentle kind."

"But why were they after you? What had happened?"

He signalled to the barman, and our empty glasses were whisked away, and full ones took their places. As he lifted his, he was looking at me steadily. His eyes went through me, turned me inside out, but seemed satisfied at last.

"You wouldn't be interested," he said. "It was just a little argument at the dog track. A little argument about money. There was a difference of opinion as to whether they should have it or I should have it. There were several of them, and only one of me. That kind of argument always goes to the one who has his pals there. So I decided to abandon the argument, but not the money. That's when I landed in your cab."

I had seen the bundle of notes he had pulled out in the taxi. It had looked an awful lot.

"Do you often have arguments like that?"

"Not often," he smiled. "It's bad business. You should never have big-money arguments when you're alone. I wasn't expecting it," he explained. "I just dropped in there to have a look round. It's not one of my tracks."

"One of your tracks?"

"Not one of the tracks I play," he explained.

"Oh. I see," I said. I wasn't sure I did.

He finished his drink, and put some money on the counter.

"Getting late," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I'll put you in a taxi."

"Thanks." I hesitated. And then with an effort I dug right down and found my guts. "My name's Joan," I said.

"Is it?" He seemed surprised that I had troubled to tell him. "They call me Lucky," he added.

"Lucky? Does it mean you are?"

"Touch wood," he said, tapping the counter, "but so far it's kept me alive and comfortable."

"Is it lucky to be alive and comfortable?"

"If you do it by living on luck, I suppose it is."

"Is that what you do?"

"Pretty well," he said.

I thought for a second or two, and then asked him: "Do you mean you simply gamble for your living?"

He laughed. "It's you who ought to be the detective. Ready to go?"

I nodded. I was giving him all that I could drag out of myself, but it wasn't doing anything. I looked for it, right into his eyes, but it wasn't there, it wasn't coming. I stayed there, looking at him. What I hadn't known when I jumped from the cab, I knew now. It was there inside me, tugging at me. And now—with him not even going to ask to see me again—it was banging about in the pit of my stomach like sick.

I couldn't go yet. I thought I was going to cry. My legs felt floppy, and my breasts were tight. I struggled to say something, just to keep things going.

"Funny about you being called Lucky," I said.

"What's funny about it?"

"Well . . . tonight . . . getting away from those men.

. . . I mean the luckiest thing about you was me, wasn't it?"

He laughed.

"I'll give you that," he said.

"Maybe I'm a sort of mascot," I said. "Maybe you ought to fold me up and put me in your pocket."

He laughed again. "Like to live with these?" he asked. He put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a hairpin, a thimble, and a rabbit's foot. As he put them back into his pocket, I put my hand over and took hold of his arm, and gripped it slightly, and fastened my eyes on to his. For a moment we stood like it, looking at each other. I prayed for something, and I thought a tiny bit of it came into his eyes.

"I mean it," I said softly.

"You mean what?"

"About my being a mascot. I mean that. Maybe I ought to stay around somehow."

He looked at me as if I were daft. Then he shook his head.

"You've got it muddled up," he said. "Women aren't lucky. They're just the other way. I never touch 'em."

I clung to it desperately.

"But it might be different," I said. "When I leave you tonight, your luck may go with me. The greatest mascot you ever touched may be lost. That's the way things go sometimes. It's not always *things* that bring people luck. Sometimes it's a *person*. It might be. After tonight, all your life you may never have any luck again."

He was looking at me queerly now. I took my hand off

his arm. It was yes or no now. I couldn't do anything more. I turned away, as if to go. My whole inside took a leap as he pulled me back.

"I'll try you once," he said. He spoke dreamily, as if he were alone. He wasn't even looking at me. "Meet me here tomorrow night at seven. I'll take you with me to a game."

Then suddenly, as if he were coming out of a trance, he walked quickly across the bar and held the door open for me. There was a cab rank outside, and he beckoned one over and opened the door and I got in.

"Where to?" he asked. I told him the address. He gave it to the driver, and handed him some money, too.

"I've paid him," he said to me. "Good night."

And without another word, he turned and walked away down the street.

The taxi moved off. As it rattled through the streets, I sat alone in it wishing it were one of the earlier taxis with him in it too. Not with people chasing us, not with all that looking out of the back window and shouting to the driver, but just him in it too. I snuggled up in the corner of the seat, and turned to the empty seat beside me. "I don't go for women," I could hear him saying. I looked upwards, to about where his head would be. I opened my eyes to their widest.

"I don't *usually*, that is," he corrected himself.

I laughed. "A little change never hurt anyone," I said.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Burns," I said.

He shook his head. "No. I mean a name that *I* can use," he persisted.

I hesitated. Just long enough. And then I told him, "Joan."

"Joan?" He made it sound marvellous, like a soft breeze swishing through tall grass, and bees buzzing.

"What's yours?" I asked.

"Call me Lucky," he said.

"Lucky? Is that a name?"

"It does for one."

"But why Lucky?"

He laughed. "Can you think of any other name that would do for a fellow who happened by sheer chance to bump into you?"

He gave the most perfect answers, when you did the answering for him. Presently I could feel his hand come over and rest lightly against me, not trying to maul me, but just making sure that I was really there beside him.

"When am I going to see you again?" he was saying. I laughed gaily.

"Just keep your eyes open," I said. "You never can tell."

"Tomorrow," I heard him saying. He spoke softly, insistently.

"Tomorrow? But . . ."

"No buts," he said firmly. "Tomorrow. I'll call for you tomorrow evening."

The taxi drew up suddenly outside the house where my flat was. I opened the door and stepped out on to the pavement.

"Good night," I whispered into the empty darkness of the cab.

"Good night, miss," the cabby answered, spoiling it all. I ran up the steps, put my key in the lock, and then went on up the first flight of stairs. I went straight to the bedroom and tumbled off my clothes, and got into bed quickly, so that I could pretend to be asleep and wouldn't have to talk to Peggy when she came in. But I didn't really go to sleep for ages. After I had snuggled down into the sheets, I said hullo to a God who was rather a stranger. "God," I said to him, "if you can make things happen, please make him win tomorrow night. Somehow it seems to matter such a lot."

CHAPTER II

BY THE NEXT EVENING, PEGGY KNEW THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING in the wind all right. But I didn't want to talk to her much about it, because it always sounds the same old thing to other people, even when it's really different.

"You're holding out on me," she said complainingly.

"No, really, Peggy. It's just I'm going out somewhere, that's all. Nowhere much. It wouldn't interest you."

"I know it wouldn't. That's why I keep asking you, fool," she said.

I laughed. I had shared a flat for so long with Peggy, that it was very seldom we didn't open up to each other about everything.

"Let me off this one—just for tonight," I pleaded.

She was eating her supper, walking through to the bedroom between mouthfuls.

"It's the brown dress, or the blue skirt with the new jumper. I can't make up my mind," I said. "Goodness knows what sort of things they'll be wearing."

"Oh!" Peggy pounced on the clue. "So there's going to

be a crowd! If it's a party, Miss Burns, I'm coming too. I could use a party."

"Shut up and help me," I said. "Which is it to be?"

"The brown dress shows off one end of your figure," said Peggy, "and the jumper shows off the other. I should wear them both, and have two chances."

"Rude swine," I laughed. "Where I'm going, nobody looks at such things."

"Then you must be going to church, darling."

"It's the dress," I decided.

"Bottom's up!" said Peggy.

"Shut up!" I laughed. "It's not half the size of yours."

"There's one thing about it," said Peggy. "When your new boy friend puts his arm round your waist, he'll have something to rest it on."

"Shut up about my figure," I said. "Do you think I ought to wear my girdle with this dress, then?"

"Lord, no!" she exclaimed. "Don't you know a little well-concealed jealousy when you hear it? If I had your figure, darling, I'd go naked!"

"Can I borrow that new lipstick of yours? I meant to get one like it, and forgot."

She went to her drawer, fished it out, and chucked it over.

"Take it with you," she said.

"May I? Thanks."

"I won't be needing it," she said. "Men love me for myself alone. Anyway, I'm not going out anywhere this evening. I'm staying in and going to bed early. Had a frightful day at the office today."

She watched me while I did my finishing touches.

Presently she said in a serious voice: "It must be something pretty firm on your mind, Joan. This morning you tell me you've lost your job. When you've lost jobs before, you've been straight bang on the problem of finding a new one. This time, you don't seem to be giving it a thought."

I smiled. "I haven't had much time to think about it yet," I said.

"You could be thinking about it right now," she answered. "Or is this mystery date of yours tonight likely to lead to one?"

I shook my head as I walked towards the door.

"Not unless being a mascot can be called a job," I laughed. She quizzed with her face.

"I don't get it," she said. "Unless it's something I've only heard the usual names for."

"There's always that," I laughed. "Enjoy your evening's guessing. Good night."

"Have a good time," she called, as I went down the stairs.

He was waiting in the bar when I arrived there. He was watching the door for me, and as I went in he got up quickly from his seat, and came over to meet me with a smile that made me suddenly feel like jelly.

"Hullo!" he said. "I was wondering if you'd come."

I smiled back at him. Could he really have been wondering that? He led me over to the bar.

"Gin and lime?" he asked. He remembered.

"Yes, please," I said. "Have I kept you waiting?"

He shook his head. "No hurry," he said. "Have you eaten? Good. We'll just have another drink or two before we move off. I like to get warmed up before a game."

"Game of what?" I asked him.

"I thought we'd go to the roulette tonight," he said. "It's as good as anything to try you out on."

"Roulette? Has one of your friends got a wheel?"

"They're no friends of mine," he answered.

"But . . . is there somewhere, then, where you can go and play roulette in London? Like a casino?"

He laughed.

"Of course there is," he said. "There's nothing you can't play in London, if you know where to go. The place we're going to tonight has hardly got the spit and polish of a casino, because they have to keep the thing under cover. But it's not too bad, and the money's there all right."

He held out his open cigarette-case. I took one, with my left hand.

"Left hand for cigarette. Right hand for glass. Am I learning?"

He nodded. "Full marks for the first lesson," he said. "I'd better tell you one or two things before we go there. You won't play, of course. You'll just be there. You'll sit behind me, not at the table. I'll get hold of a seat where you can get a comfy chair behind me. You can drink, smoke, go to sleep if you like. No need to watch the play at all. Just be there. And whatever you do, don't watch the actual wheel as it's spinning. That's suicide. Got it?"

I nodded, and laughed.

"Doesn't sound very difficult," I said. I was wondering just when it was that I had gone crazy. A nice quiet evening, just sitting behind him.

Ask me to that kind of party any time, and I'll tell you to think again, and think quickly. But not now. Not tonight. Somehow, the idea is all right. No thinking again tonight. That's what you've come for, isn't it? Just to be with him, just to keep in touch, that's the whole idea, isn't it? And what's flat about it, anyway? Nothing. That's the funny thing. It actually sounds all right.

We sat in the bar there for twenty minutes or so. He talked idly, easily, as if the whole situation appeared to be completely commonplace to him. He made no joke about the idea of my being a mascot. He treated it quite naturally, as a business man would treat the acquiring of a secretary, except that he did not seem to want to ask me any questions at all. The way we had met the night before, and the reason we were together again now, seemed to have no place in his mind. Without the slightest effort, he simply ignored the manner or the reason of our being together. Sometimes, at a cocktail party, you get pocketed in a corner of the room with a complete stranger, and you both know that you probably won't ever meet again, and yet you talk together easily and freely and variedly. That was the way he was talking to me now. And when someone talks to you like that, you can't go on having your mind chock full of the peculiar circumstances of being with him. It just doesn't work. A natural acceptance of everything is infectious. As he talked, it took hold of me. By the time we left the bar, and got into a taxi, I'd forgotten there was anything unusual about the evening.

I was expecting to go to some shady-looking place for the roulette, but when the taxi stopped, a smart commissionaire in uniform hurried forward and opened the door of the cab, and the next moment we were entering a large and expensive-looking restaurant, with music playing from somewhere in the distance. Glancing round quickly, I saw that the people were about equally divided between evening dress and ordinary. Lucky was wearing a quiet check suit, so I wasn't worrying. He led the way right across the big room, and we sat down at a table near the far end.

"I thought you said you had eaten," I said. "This doesn't look like——"

"Shh! . . ." He stopped me before I could say any more. "You'll see in a minute," he said, softly so that people at nearby tables should not be able to hear. "This is all part of the cover up."

A waiter came forward, and said good evening with a note of recognition in his voice.

"We'll have a dance first, and order later," Lucky told him. "Look after this lady's gloves and handbag."

"Certainly, sir."

Lucky stood up again, and took hold of the back of my chair to move it out of my way as I stood up. He put his hand lightly round my waist, and we moved across the floor to the rhythm of the music. He danced easily and smoothly. We fitted well. For a moment I forgot all about the roulette, and sank into enjoying the dancing. But he soon brought me back to it. With his lips close to my ear, he whispered: "When we get to that curtain in the corner, we just slip through it casually. Don't worry about your handbag—it will be brought to you upstairs."

He steered the way through the other dancing couples towards the curtain. As we reached it, he just pulled it slightly aside, and I stepped through with him close behind me.

Now we were in a small room, with one or two armchairs, and a bar along one side. It all looked very respectable still. He led the way over to the bar, and we sat on the high stools.

"This is the second line of cover up," he said. "Same again?"

I nodded. He ordered the drinks from the man behind the bar. When the drinks were put down in front of us, Lucky jerked his head in my direction and said to the barman: "Visitor this evening, Charlie."

"Yes, sir. Good evening, madam."

We sipped our drinks, and nothing seemed to be happening. But the barman must have passed a signal somehow, because in about five minutes a waiter approached from behind and spoke to Lucky.

"Mr. Bertram wonders if you and madam would do him the honour of having a drink with him in his private office, sir."

Lucky lifted his eyebrows with perfect restrained surprise.

"We'd be delighted to," he answered. "Where is it?"

"I will show you, sir. This way."

He opened a door in the panelling of the room, which I had not noticed before. Outside the door was a lift. We got into the lift and were whisked upwards. Then we got out into a passage, and followed the passage along, and went through a door, and suddenly there it all was.

I gaped. It was a huge room, very brightly lighted, with a lot of cigarette and cigar smoke hanging in the air. In the middle of the room was a long table, around which were crowded at least fifty people. There were men and women of all kinds, well dressed and badly dressed, young and old, all

eagerly clustering round the table. From the middle of the crowd came the whirr and then the click-clatter-click of a roulette wheel.

Lucky turned to me and smiled.

"That's how you get here," he said. "Like it?"

"It's amazing," I said. It really was. There was no pretence about anything now. The croupier was calling out the result of the spin in a loud voice. Gasps of amazed disappointment mingled with cries of delight. There was the sound of counters being raked in; and the crisp crackle of notes.

I edged forward, straining up on my toes to see over the people's heads. I felt Lucky's hand on my arm.

"You'll remember, won't you?" he said. "You can't possibly bring me luck at this if you're actually watching the wheel while it spins, and if you're not behind me. And you mustn't play yourself, of course."

"Just let me have a peep before you start," I asked him.

"Come on, then. Edge your way through here."

I managed to squeeze through to the inside of the crowd, and stood just behind one of the seated players. I couldn't make out what the counters were worth, but from the way people kept passing notes up to the croupiers, and getting just a few counters in exchange, I could tell there was a terrific lot of money on the table. I watched the players putting their counters all over the numbers, and watched their faces, strained and anxious, as the white ball whizzed round the saucer of the wheel and then clattered and jumped its way finally to rest. Then across the green top of the table would come the wooden rake, and as the counters were pulled into the bank, some of the faces round the table had the most awful look on them.

You know the way it is when you start to watch something like that. It gets hold of you tight. I had quite lost count of how long I had been watching when I felt Lucky tugging at my arm.

"They've found a seat for me, over the other side," he said. "Keep behind me, and no looking at the wheel now. For heaven's sake don't forget."

One of the men, a kind of steward, was motioning to Lucky from across the table, and a woman was getting up from her seat. There seemed to be lots of people who would have liked the seat, and who had been there before we arrived, so I guessed that the seat was being given to Lucky because they knew he was one of the big players and they wanted him to get going. I followed him as he walked round the room to

get to the other side of the table. Near the far wall there were two or three armchairs, and a waiter standing by a buffet with sandwiches and drinks on it. I wanted to please Lucky, and most of all I wanted him to win with me there. So before he took his seat, I nudged him, and whispered that I was going to sit down behind him, in one of the armchairs, where I would be too low down even to see the wheel if I tried. He gave me a pleased little grin. As he took his seat, I saw him pull a bundle of notes out of his pocket. And then I sank down into one of the armchairs and settled myself to wait.

I couldn't see anything from the armchair except the backs of the people. But the listening was quite fun for a time. First the confused babble of people making up their minds where to put their money. Then a call from the croupier, and then a sudden hush, and then nothing but the whirr that the ball made as it whizzed round and round the wooden rim. For those few seconds, while it was flying round fast, nobody made the slightest sound. And then, simultaneously with the sudden irregular clatter-click of the ball bouncing across the metal slots, the voices would all start again. "Seven! No, it's gone past! It can't be twenty-four *again*! It's zero! Why doesn't it stop! It's seven! No, it's not, it's seventeen! Oh, God!" Then the firm, clear voice of the croupier, rising above the clamour to announce the number and the colour and the other things. And then the cries of delight trying to drown the gasps of disappointment. And then inevitably, exactly the same thing all over again.

Now and again, when a gap in the people happened to come in the right place, I could see the back of Lucky's head, and the side of his face when he turned. It was hard to tell from the look of him whether he was winning or losing. He didn't join in the shouts and the gasps. He just sat looking calm and casual, almost uninterested. "Let him win! Please let him win!" I said the words inside myself, and willed and willed for the numbers he picked to turn up.

From time to time, people left the table and wandered away out of the room, while new people filtered in. The game just went on and on and on. Sometimes people came over to the buffet, to refresh themselves with sandwiches and drinks. These seemed to be free, for I couldn't see anyone pay. Presently the waiter came across to me.

"Wouldn't you like a drink, or a sandwich, madam?"

I must have been sitting there about two hours by then, and I was beginning to feel hungry. So I had a sandwich, and then I had a drink. I took a cigarette out of my handbag,

which had been brought to me the way Lucky had said it would. I lighted the cigarette, and I sat there, rather sleepy now, sipping my drink.

Suddenly I was conscious of Lucky standing in front of me, and I heard the hard, biting voice that he didn't often use.

"I knew it! Your glass and cigarette! Look at them!"

I jumped. I was holding them both in the same hand, and I quickly took the cigarette into the other hand.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I wasn't thinking. I forgot."

"It's no good forgetting," he said fiercely. And then suddenly his voice softened. "But that's a funny thing," he went on, speaking as if to himself now. "I didn't put the stake on. I knew there was something wrong." He looked hard into my eyes. "That's a funny thing," he said again. "I was just about to make my biggest stake of the evening. It would have lost. But just as I was going to place it, something seemed to stop me. And then I looked round and saw what you were doing."

I sat there, feeling like hell, not knowing what to say. But he was smiling to me now.

"You're a mascot at this, all right," he said. "I've never had such an evening. I couldn't do anything wrong."

My inside welled right up as he spoke. I felt my eyes wide open, and a smile spreading right across my face.

"Let's go. You must be hungry or tired or something."

As we crossed the room to get to the door, the croupiers called good night to Lucky, and heads turned from the table to look at him. The faces seemed to be impressed and envious. The man on the door bowed and thanked him profusely for whatever it was he slipped into his hand. It made you feel quite important being with him.

When we got out into the street it was a clear, soft night, and we walked for a while to shake off the smokiness of the roulette room. Lucky was in a gay mood now. All that sudden, frightening fierceness of his voice and his eyes could vanish just as quickly as it came.

It was only midnight. I imagined Lucky would have gone on playing much longer if it hadn't suddenly finished up the way it did. And yet you couldn't tell. He had not even glanced back at the table after getting up from it. Most of the players seemed to have to drag themselves away, one half of their minds fighting with the other half. After leaving their seats, they played another two or three spins standing up, and even as they left the room they would be craning back

over their shoulders to see what number had just turned up. But Lucky did things quickly and decisively. The way he had suddenly decided to bring me with him tonight, and then treated the whole question as over and done with, seemed to be typical of him.

"Where would you like to have supper?" he asked.

I didn't care. I left it to him. We went on strolling through the emptying streets, until he suddenly stopped outside a brilliantly lighted entrance, and put his hand on my arm and steered me inside.

It was a smart place; one of those places where you don't have to dress, but which are just as expensive all the same. A band that was often on the radio was playing for dancing. I was glad I had decided on the dress instead of the jumper.

"Champagne?" I heard Lucky asking me as we sat down and the waiter fussed round us. "We must celebrate the success of the mascot!"

"I can see I'll have to practice my drinking!" I said.

"What are you going to eat?"

"You order. I'm too tired to think."

He ordered, and the waiter bustled away. But soon there were two more back again, bowing and scraping as they arranged a silver bucket with ice in it, showing Lucky the label on the bottle, and then making a great show of undoing the wire round the cork. People from neighbouring tables turned our way as the cork came out with a loud pop. I was feeling like a queen.

When they had poured out some champagne for us, Lucky raised his glass to the level of his eyes with a quick, deliberate movement that made it look very important. I raised mine, too, and he clinked his against mine, and said: "To little Jo—the good-luck girl!"

His eyes were twinkling across the rim of his champagne glass. Then he moved the glass to his lips and tilted it to drink, so I had to drink too before I said:

"Little? The word every girl likes to hear! And just as I was beginning to think that you hadn't practised your flattery!"

He put his glass down on the table, and gave me that quizzical, distant little smile of his.

"Forgive my neglect," he pleaded. "To tell you the truth because a man must never try to deceive his mascots—to tell you the truth, I christened you Little Jo for quite another reason."

I made my face drop exaggeratedly, and sighed deeply.

"Shame!" I exclaimed. "How quickly a girl's dreams can

be dashed to the ground. Do you mean to tell me that my exercises haven't had any effect since last night? Does that last sandwich show?"

He laughed.

"Dear lady," he said, "you're practically invisible. In this atmosphere, anyway."

"That's better," I said. "You're improving rapidly. And now, suppose you tell me what other and less gallant reason you had for using the word?"

"Well—your name's Joan. Jo is short for Joan. And when you've got Jo, you just think of the dice and then you've got Little Jo."

I gave him a look, and gulped some more champagne down, and looked again.

"You must excuse me," I said. "I'm just a little country girl. Is it anything like thinking of hay, and getting Old Jarge?"

"I hope you like that," he said, and I realized the waiter was helping some food from a dish on to the plate in front of me. "It's one of the things they do best here. You mean you don't know what Little Jo is? It's a throw in a dice game. You throw the two dice, and if you get a two and a one it's called Little Joe. It's a dirty throw."

"A dirty throw? Oh, I see. I'm so glad. If I'm going to be a throw at dice, I simply insist on being a dirty throw. So much more distinguished."

"You've got it wrong," he said. "I don't mean it's crooked—it's just a loser."

"Is it? Then couldn't I go on a different diet, and be a Big Joe, or a Whopping Ned, or something that wins instead?"

He was looking dreamily at the bubbles in his glass. All of a sudden he could somehow go miles away from you.

"It's a perfect fit," he was saying. But he was saying it to himself. "If you throw Little Jo, you lose. And if you throw a lucky mascot away, you lose. As long as the luck comes, and you don't throw either, then the name's just right." He pulled himself back into public. "Jo for short," he said.

"How's the food, Jo?"

"It's delicious," I answered. "I think you must be crazy. Ever considered the point?"

He spread his hands apart.

"As long as it pays—who cares?" he asked.

The lights went out suddenly. I turned my head towards the band, and as the pianist's fingers rippled up the keys, a girl came forward, into the middle of the 'dance floor, and

started to sing. Her voice was soft and low, almost a whisper some of the time, yet so clear that you could hear every word. She took hold of the crowd. Not a plate moved while she sang, and when the song was finished there was that sudden few seconds of magic silence before the clapping came. And then she was singing again:

"So long as it's happening,
Don't ask why—
Or you may stop it happening more."

I looked round at Lucky, and caught his eyes in the half-darkness, and silently lifted my glass. He smiled and raised his too. After the singing was over, and the lights were up for dancing again, I laughed and said: "Did you have her sing that specially for me?"

"So far, you haven't needed much special instruction," he said. "Want to dance?"

I nodded, and pushed back my chair. He took me and drifted me round the floor. You could wait for years before you found a man who could hold you like this. I wished he was out with me just for dancing, just because he liked being with me. You dreamed of that sometimes. You invented a man who was tall and good-looking. You gave him charm, and humour; and most of all you gave him that easy, don't-give-a-damn kind of attitude of things. You made him a tiny bit different from everyday people. Like Lucky. Yes, very like Lucky. And he took you out eating and dancing. Casually, but often. Nice places you went to. He could afford nice places. And it was just because he liked being with you. No funny business, no paying for it in the taxi afterwards. It was just you, and him, and the magic between you that you dreamed about. And you danced so well together. Just like this, just like it was at this very moment now. You and a man and the music, just like this. You didn't talk, because each of you knew what the other was thinking. It was heaven on earth, and you found it at last. You dreamed it and dreamed it, and then it came true. The dance floor could be crowded, but everyone else disappeared. His guiding hand was firm, yet lightly on you. You could shut your eyes and shut your ears, and still it was the same. Your mind, your body, your dancing feet were his. For all you cared, it could go on like this for ever.

The music stopped. Lucky led me back to the table.

"We've got to decide what percentage you have of the winnings," he said.

I pushed the dream-world back into its right place, and sat down on the chair.

"Winnings? They're your winnings, not mine."

"I told you, I've never had an evening like it before. That was because you were a good mascot. You've got a share coming. There can't be any argument about that. The only question is, what basis shall we work on?"

I fingered my glass.

"I'll take another glass of champagne and call it quits," I said.

He leaned across quickly, and grabbed the bottle out of its bucket, and filled my glass and then his own. When he wanted to, he could do little things in a way that made you feel you were the only person in the world. Now he slid his glass across the tablecloth to mine, so that the two of them were standing touching each other.

"Come on," he coaxed. "We must talk it out and get it settled. After all, it's business."

"Is it? Yes—I suppose it is."

"Of course it is." The tone of his voice seemed to suggest that it couldn't possibly be anything else. "I want you to come again. I want you to come often. As long as you go on bringing me this kind of luck, I want you to come whenever you possibly can. And I couldn't ask you to keep tagging around to watch me play just for the fun of the thing, could I? I wouldn't, anyway. We'll have to have some proper arrangement, so that you get some percentage of the winnings."

As he finished speaking, the lights went low again, and a dancer came gliding across the floor. He turned his head to watch her. The side of his face was towards me, so that I could look at him deliberately without him knowing. But there was nothing to see, nothing to find in his face. As long as I brought him luck, then he hoped I would come often. Just like that, as long as I brought him luck. No other reason. Not just for the fun of coming, good gracious, no. Not just because I might want to come. Not just because being with him might be the only thing that mattered, the thing round which the whole shape of life could be made to fit so perfectly. Oh no, not anything like that. Just because of the luck. Just as long as I brought the luck with me. And when I didn't . . .

The dancer had stopped, and Lucky's head was turned towards me again.

"I'm a bit tired," I said. "Do you mind if we go?"

He beckoned to the waiter, and asked for the bill.

While we were waiting for it, he said: "We'll leave the arrangement for tonight. By the way—which is your favourite dress shop?"

"My favourite? I don't think I've exactly got one special favourite. Why?"

"Well . . . tell me one where you'd like to go and buy things if money didn't matter."

I wondered where he was getting to now. I thought for a moment and then said: "Revare's is nice."

"Where's that?"

"Brook Street," I said. "Why?"

He smiled.

"Go there tomorrow, and tell them your name, and see what they've got for you," he said.

I opened my mouth to say something, I don't quite know what, but he put his hand up and silenced me.

"Don't you dare to argue any more," he said firmly. "One argument is enough for any one evening."

The bill came, and he glanced at it and put some notes down. Then he stood up and put his hand under my elbow and guided me out into the street. A taxi was at the kerb.

"Where is it?" he asked me.

I told him my address. "But don't you come," I added. "It's rather a long way out."

"Do you mind? You'll be all right, won't you?" He handed me into the cab, and closed the door. Then he put his head through the window.

"I've paid the cab," he said. "When's next time going to be? Can I 'phone you?"

I told him the number. He took a pencil and scribbled it down on an envelope.

"Good night, Little Jo," he smiled. And as the cab started off, he called to me through the window: "Don't forget Revare's!"

CHAPTER III

PEGGY WAS JUST A BUBBLING MASS OF QUESTIONS WHEN I tiptoed into the flat.

"Asleep, indeed!" she scorned. "You were far too excited when you left here this evening for me to go to sleep. I've been lying in bed agog. Besides, you know darned well how disappointed you'd have been if I hadn't been waiting to be told all about it."

I laughed as I wriggled out of my dress.

"Nothing doing, darling," I said. "Much as I appreciate your kind enquiries."

"Ah! Secret Heart stuff, eh? Come on. Tell auntie. Who is he?"

"He?"

"Oh, dear! You must have it badly. Yes, *he*. You know—one of those short-haired things with trousers. Don't you remember?"

"I knew them in my youth," I laughed. I was sitting on the bed, bending over to slide off a stocking, and one of Peggy's pillows wopped me on the head.

"Drat!" I said. "You've made me snick my stocking."

"Sorry. But it'll teach you not to be furtive." She hopped out of bed and took the stocking quickly from me, and licked the place to stop it from running. Then she opened a drawer and got out her needle. "It's right up at the top—it won't show," she said. "Been dancing?"

"Mmmm." I splodged the cream on my face and started rubbing.

"And eating?"

"You bet!"

"Where did he take you?"

"Hey—stop tracking me down."

"You shouldn't behave so suspiciously," she retorted. "You went out this evening with the air of a kid who's just going to do a high dive for the first time. And you came in like a guilty mouse, trying not to wake me up. That's not the blasé, know-how-to-handle-'em baby that I'm used to. Come on, Joan, let's have the dirt!"

I gave my cheek a final pat, and scrambled into bed.

"Tell you later," I said. "I'm tired, just longing to go to sleep. Ready for me to put the light out?"

From her bed, on the other side of the dressing-table, she put out an elegant tongue at me. I grinned and turned out the light.

"I shall have no alternative but to think the worst," she said. "Poor child!"

I chuckled as I turned over on the pillow. Then I heard Peggy snuggling down in bed, and a muffled, sleepy voice complaining: "Secretive swine."

The next morning I started on the rounds of the agencies, looking for a job. As usual, there were plenty that smelt, but precious few that sounded worth trying. I tried one in the morning, and another in the afternoon, and flopped at both.

I didn't expect to land anything the first day. You hardly ever do. And I don't really think that my mind was concentrating on it enough, anyway. I couldn't get Lucky out of the picture. I kept thinking of the previous evening, going through it all again, remembering new details each time. I could see Lucky. He was the kind of person you could remember vividly and clearly. I could see the back of his head as he sat at the roulette table, the side of his face as he turned, his eyes over the top of his champagne glass, the smile breaking across his mouth. I could feel his hand behind my waist as we were dancing. I could hear his easy voice. "Don't forget Revare's!"

Not that I would go, of course. That was just one of those pleasant things that were said, that was all. Exciting to hear, lovely to have said to you. But you spoiled those things if you followed them up. Life could be perfect as long as it contained dreams. It didn't matter how foolish, how wild they were. And if someone else helped you to dream them, that was all the nicer. But they had to stay that way. You would spoil and lose them so easily if you treated them as anything but dreams. Besides, what else *was* there to do? A fine sort of fool you would feel, if you walked into a swagger dress shop and gave your name, and stood waiting expectantly, and gradually realized they had never heard of you.

But the next morning Lucky 'phoned. It was a good thing I was late in going out, or I would have missed him. And as soon as we had done the usual how-are-you's, he said:

"I 'phoned Revare's this morning, to see if you had been there yesterday. They said you hadn't."

"No," I said. "I didn't."

"Didn't you have the time?"

I hesitated, not knowing quite what to say.

"I didn't like to," I said lamely. "I didn't imagine you really meant it. I didn't exactly know what you did mean, anyway."

"But I told you," he said. "All you have to do is just go there and give your name. I've arranged it all. I've opened an account for you."

I felt things getting a bit deep.

"But I can't do that, Lucky," I said. "I mean, I can't let *you* do that."

"Why ever not?" His voice sounded genuinely surprised. "You can do what you like with the money later on, as soon as we've got some arrangement fixed up. But you wouldn't discuss it the other evening, and we can't do it over the 'phone."

So for the time being, go to Revare's and get something you like."

"But, Lucky," I said, "I don't *want* any money. Why should you give me anything? I enjoyed coming out with you. I hope I'll be asked again."

"That's not quite the point, Jo," he answered. "Apart from anything else, I've got a feeling that it might upset the luck if you weren't having a share. You see, there wouldn't seem any reason for your luck sliding over on to me, if it wasn't bringing you anything."

I laughed.

"You're completely crazy, aren't you!"

His laugh came back over the 'phone.

"Never mind about that," he said. "By the way, are you free to come out tomorrow night?"

"Er . . . yes."

"Fine. Will you meet me at the same place, same time? And would it be too much trouble to put on evening dress? It's that kind of a place this time."

"I will," I said.

"And promise me you'll go to Revare's and choose something today," he insisted. "That will make sure of the luck tomorrow."

"All right," I said. "I'll go this afternoon."

After we had rung off, I decided to abandon the job hunt for the day. My head was too full of funny things. So I spent the rest of the morning doing things in the flat, and got myself some lunch, and then set off rather nervously for Revare's.

I had looked in the window often, but I had never been inside before. It was very expensive, far beyond me or Peggy. I was beginning to feel a bit queer about the whole thing, and when I got to the shop I walked right past it the first time. Then I pulled myself together, and turned back and went up to the door and marched in.

A woman came forward. "Madame?"

"My name is Burns," I said. "Joan Burns."

A smile of welcome spread over her face.

"Of course!" she said. "We were told you were coming. Had you anything particular in mind, or would you just like to have a general look round first? If you see anything that you think you might like, I'll have a mannequin show it for you."

I didn't want to put my foot in it. I hadn't the slightest idea how much I ought to spend.

"Someone telephoned you to say I was coming, didn't they?" I asked.

"Yes, madame."

"What did they say exactly? I mean . . . what sort of . . ." It was getting rather awkward, but it did not seem to present any awkwardness to her.

"An account has been opened in your name," she said clearly and smoothly, as if it were the kind of thing that happened every day. "We were told you would probably be choosing things up to—say—one hundred pounds."

I looked at her with my mouth open, wondering if I had heard it right.

"How much did you say?" My voice was not nearly as casual as it tried to be.

"About one hundred pounds, madame. But, of course, there is no need to confine yourself rigidly to that."

I went on looking at her as if she were dotty. My head was buzzing round, trying vainly to grab on to something. Lucky must have won an awful lot of money that night, if this represented just a share of it. And what was everyone in the shop thinking? What was the woman thinking? She must have been thinking everything, but she didn't show it. She was probably used to it. For a horrible moment I felt like a prostitute. It was silly, but it was simply because I knew what she must be thinking. But it only lasted a second or two. It was ridiculous, I pushed it out of my mind. Around me there were lovely things, the kind of things that usually you only saw in windows and in *Vogue*. And now they were mine, for nothing wrong, for nothing wrong at all. A long, sleek swish of ice-blue satin was asking me to touch it. Undies of thinner-than-possible silk were there for me to hold.

I stayed for nearly three hours. I couldn't remember ever having had such a heavenly time.

The next day the things were delivered. They came towards the end of the morning, after I had been hanging about for a couple of hours with one eye out of the window looking for that very smart little powder-blue delivery van. I unpacked them carefully, and tried them all on over and over again, and rearranged my wardrobe so that the new things had plenty of room to hang without squashing against each other. I was going to wear one of the evening frocks for meeting Lucky that night, and I put it on early, and spent a long time doing my hair a new way that seemed to be just right for the frock.

I was all ready to kill by the time Peggy arrived home. I stood in the living-room, standing as casually as I could,

pretending that nothing was up, and waiting to see what she said. I knew she would adore it.

She came into the room, and stopped abruptly. She gazed at the frock for a moment with her eyes wide open. Then she lifted her eyes up to mine for a second, and then they went quickly down to the muddle of unpacked boxes that I had left on the floor. She looked at me again.

"It's lovely," she said.

Then she turned, and walked through the connecting door into the bedroom, and opened my wardrobe. She ran a hand lightly along the hanging clothes. Then she closed the wardrobe again, and came back into the living-room. She came across and looked at me again, and put a hand lightly on my shoulder. She seemed to have gone quite queer. Her eyes were looking steadily into mine. They were asking questions.

Her voice was very quiet when she spoke.

"Darling," she said. "You haven't got anything you want to tell me? Nothing at all?"

I shook my head and laughed.

"No," I said. "There isn't anything."

"We don't have many secrets, do we, Joan?"

I laughed again. "There's honestly nothing to tell you," I said. "It's the craziest story. It doesn't make sense!"

She took her hand away from my shoulder, and slowly shook her head.

"No," she said, deliberately. "It wouldn't make sense. It never did. It never does."

I felt a funny little hot feeling up the back of my neck. I stamped my foot hard on the floor.

"What the hell!" I exclaimed. "Am I your child or something?"

I turned my back on her, and walked over and grabbed my wrap, and without looking at her again, I went out of the flat and slammed the door behind me.

I was fuming all the time I was on my way to meet Lucky, but the moment I walked into the bar and saw him getting up to greet me, everything else just slipped away. His easy, lazy smile was the nicest thing to look at in the world. He was wearing tails, and he knew how to. They made him look taller and slimmer than ever. I was glad I had made myself look extra nice. I was looking good that evening. I knew. I just knew. You have days when you feel fat and clumpy and all wrong, and then you have days when you feel thin and fresh and sparkling. This was one of my thin days.

His eyes went quickly down me and up again, with a sort of delighted surprise in them. Then he led me over to one of the seats at the bar.

"Don't tell me," he said. "I know what you'll have. Nobody looking like that would stoop to anything less than a champagne cocktail. Two champagne cocktails, please!"

"Lucky," I laughed, "you *can* pay compliments! You've been hiding your skill all these years!"

"The knack has come to me with age," he said. "Cigarette?"

"Thanks," I said. I took one from his case, and he flipped his lighter and held it for me. "I'll give you one guess as to where this frock came from," I said.

He smiled. "I hoped you'd go and get something," he said. "But, Lucky—I oughtn't to have done, really. There was absolutely no reason why you should have given me anything. And I spent such an awful lot of money, too. I didn't mean to. But the manageress said it was all right, and encouraged me a bit, and I just sort of lost my head and went on and on. And now I'm beginning to feel absolutely dreadful about it all."

Lucky did one of his extra friendly smiles.

"Don't be so unbusinesslike," he said. "It's a clear enough case, isn't it? We were teamed up. I did the playing, while you ladled out the luck in the biggest dollops I've ever had. Obviously, things like that have got to be done on some kind of a split. If you continue to be such a lucky charm, the only thing to do is to arrange for you to have a definite percentage of the winnings."

I wished he didn't have to talk as if our being together was like something that happens in an office. That wasn't the way I had meant things to be. It made things seem so serious and unromantic. I wished I hadn't started all that silly business about my being a lucky mascot. And yet that first meeting, it was the only way I could think of for seeing him again. It was fun for once, but now it looked like going on. This luck I brought him—was that the only thing about me? Other men saw other things. I was as wide awake as the average girl. I could tell, like any girl can, when a man's pulse was jumping, and when he was wanting things. Other men showed it all right. I'd got my share of what was wanted. But Lucky just didn't seem to see any of it. I gave him every chance, but though I looked and looked, searching right into him, I couldn't find the echo of it there. I told myself, maybe it was just slow in coming. Sometimes it was. With some

people, you thought it was never going to show at all, and then it came across all of a sudden, the stronger for being delayed. But, all the same, you couldn't count on it being like that. If you felt the feeling inside you for someone, it didn't have to be that he felt it for you too. It was just that you prayed so hard for it. You wanted it so much that you wouldn't let yourself believe that maybe it wasn't going to happen. He likes me. He must like me, or he wouldn't have me around. Maybe he wants me just for the luck, but he wouldn't put up with me if he didn't at least think I was nice. Although, he is such a crazy fool about luck. He could put up with anything for that. It just isn't there in his eyes. He's pleasant, polished, charming but it just isn't there. It's only this luck business. You're trying to grab yourself something that doesn't want to come. You silly, dreaming fool.

But there was another champagne cocktail waiting for me on the counter. I'd never had champagne cocktails before. They make you feel happy. You can't be sad for many minutes, you can't even think serious things, the champagne cocktails won't let you. Your heart comes bubbling up, and you know for sure that your eyes are smiling. Here you are, and so is he, and what else matters?

"Here's to tonight," I said.

"To the lucky team."

"Where is it we're going? And what is it we're doing?"

"One of these slap-up charity baccarat parties," he said.

"Full of people with more money than they know what to do with. Half of them only go for the social occasion, but by the time they go home they find they've paid a lot of money for mixing with the nobs."

"And what are my instructions for the evening, sir?" I laughed. "Do I shut my eyes, or stand on my head while you play, or anything like that?"

Lucky smiled. "You make it sound perfectly frightful," he said. "It must be terribly boring not playing."

"Of course it isn't," I said. "I'd rather not play, than play for the kind of stakes you go in for. I should be scared stiff."

"No need to be scared while our luck's around. You can watch if you want to tonight. But if you do, you won't be able to sit down, because only players can have the seats at the tables, and you can only see what is happening by standing and looking over their shoulders. But there'll be plenty of comfortable chairs away from the tables, and plenty of food and drink going. Are we ready to be moving off?"

I emptied my glass and slid down from my stool. Lucky

paid for the drinks, and we went outside and got into a taxi. It only took a few minutes. We drew up outside one of those huge town houses that you imagine are full of butlers and footmen. This one certainly was. There were silver-buttoned flunkies inside the door and along the passages and all over the place. Lovely dresses and expensive wraps were mingled with the black and white of men in evening clothes. It looked like those pictures of very distinguished receptions.

Lucky led me through two huge rooms full of people, into a third one that was fixed up as a bar and buffet. We sat down, and he asked me what I would have.

"They've got everything," he said. "By the way, put this invitation card in your bag. You might possibly be asked for it."

The waiter came over, and Lucky asked him to bring two glasses of champagne.

"I shall be tight," I told him.

"Nonsense. Champagne never does that, unless you drink a bucketful. This one more won't hurt you, anyway. When we've drunk it I'll get down to the game."

We sat there smoking and sipping our drinks for a quarter of an hour or so. I was enjoying myself. The drinks were making me warm inside, and the lights were bright and gay, and it was all lovely. Nobody had a more handsome man to sit with. He was lighting my cigarettes, and leaning forward towards me as he talked, and being friendly and attentive, and it made you feel important and warm all over. If the thing wasn't there in his eyes, well . . . did you want the whole world?

We sat and talked idly, and watched the people, and sipped our drinks, and it almost seemed as if Lucky had forgotten about his gambling. But just as I was thinking that, he said:

"I prefer to let the game warm up a bit first. They always start low, and gradually the stakes build up. If you join in too soon, you may have your luck when the money is small. It's better to join in when they're getting a bit taut and strained. They don't think so well then."

I nodded, pretending to know all about it, and hoping that the warming-up process would take a nice long time. But it seemed to be over, because Lucky stood up, and said he hoped I was comfortable, and would I be sure to ask for anything I wanted to eat or drink, and au revoir for the time being. Then he sauntered away into the next room, where the tables were.

I settled down to enjoy watching the people. It was exciting to be in a place like this. You kept seeing faces that you had seen in the papers and the *Tatler*. It was fun trying to search your memory and fit the names to the faces. There were actors and actresses, famous racing people, and even Ladies and Sirs and Countesses and people like that. I was glad about my new frock. I sat there trying to look as if I spent half my time in places like this.

But I was not alone for very long. It must have been less than an hour before Lucky came back. He had another man with him.

"This is Mr. Charles, Jo," he said to me. "Miss Burns," he added to the man.

The man bowed, I thought a bit exaggeratedly, and asked me if he could sit down.

"Of course," I said.

"He'll like you better if you call him Flash," Lucky said. "Everybody does."

I smiled politely. I couldn't help thinking that Smarmy or Snaky would have been a more suitable name. He was handsome enough, but in a very black-haired kind of way. His eyes seemed to take things for granted. He was the kind of man who somehow makes you want to cross your legs and cover up your knees. But if he was one of Lucky's friends, I thought that ought to make him safe enough.

Lucky didn't sit down. He was anxious to get back to the game.

"They've been taking it out of Flash," he told me. "So he's giving it a rest, to give his luck a chance to change. I thought I'd bring him along to you for company. See you both later."

He walked off again. Flash smiled at me professionally, and beckoned a waiter over.

"I want to drink to a delightful meeting," he said. "What shall it be? I think"—he looked at his watch—"it's time for brandy."

"But I've been having champagne," I said.

"All the more reason for brandy now," he answered. "They are excellent sleeping partners. Let us have two large brandies please," he said to the waiter.

I was feeling much too nice inside to want to argue about anything. The wine, and now the brandy too, had filled me up with friendliness. Flash was not so bad. You had to be careful about jumping to conclusions about people the first time you saw them. You had to be very, very careful. He was really very nice. You've got a nasty, suspicious, un-

friendly mind, that's your trouble. He's charming. He's delightful. He tells such funny stories. Such lovely funny stories. I'm sure they're funny stories that he's telling. When he laughs, I laugh. That's the way. That's what you call being good company. Brilliant.

"All right, yes—I'll have another brandy."

I must remember some of these funny stories. They're a scream. Peggy will love them. I think they're funny stories, but it's difficult to concentrate on them. When you feel so lovely and warm inside, you can't be bothered to concentrate. What's the point of doing that? You're both laughing together. You're laughing all the time. Brilliant company, that's what both of you are. On an empty stomach, that's what they call it. It's terrific.

There's Lucky, now. Good old Lucky. Standing up in front of us. How are you, Lucky? I can see you.

Lucky's talking. What's he saying? Why doesn't he talk a bit louder? Louder and clearer, that's better. Get up? All right, of course I'll get up. If you want to go, of course I'll get up. You don't have to snap at me. We're all friendly and we all feel lovely, and we don't want any snappers. There you are. Now I'm standing up, aren't I? That's the way, isn't it? Stand still, Lucky. Let me lean on you, eh? I can see you. One of Lucky. Two of Lucky. That's funny. Oh, dear! I'm beginning to feel awful.

Across the room? Yes, that's right, across the room. Me lean on both of you, eh? Hooray! Oh, help! The place is going upside down. Pull it back, you fool, pull it back. You're letting go. You mustn't let go. It'll be all right in a minute. It soon goes off.

Through the door here. Hold me. Hold me. Oh, Lucky, please hold me. So cold. Let's go back in. So killing cold out here. What's that? Yes, call a taxi, that's right. Keep moving, that's the thing. Down the steps. Look out—there's another one. Done it! Now across to the taxi. It's uphill to the taxi. Steep, steep, it's all uphill. Don't push, just hold me. Please hold me. There we are. Two of Lucky. Two of Lucky. Oh, no! Pull them together somehow. Two of Lucky, further and further away. Oh, no, I'm going. Please, please, I feel awful, and I'm going. Now!

CHAPTER IV

THE MUSIC HAD FADED AWAY, AND NOW MY HEAD WAS COLD. I wiped my tongue round the dry, stale inside of my mouth.

I tried to open my eyes, but the lids were stuck down with the dried-up juice, and I had to work them with my finger before they would open.

I was lying on a bed, in a room I had not seen before. It was a modern, nicely furnished room. The curtains were drawn, but the sunlight was coming through them so that the room was quite light. As I started to wonder where I was, I remembered what had happened. I must have passed flat out and been carried to this bedroom.

Quickly a fright flashed across my mind. But I still had all my clothes on, just as they had been, and I couldn't feel that anything had happened. Next minute I told myself that I was a fool even to give that a thought. Lucky would have looked after me.

There was a quiet knock at the door, as if someone wanted to find out if I were awake, without waking me if I were asleep.

"Who's that?"

"Good morning! May I come in?" It was Lucky's voice. I sat up quickly on the bed.

"Where's this? No—please don't come in for a minute!"

I knew I must be looking an awful sight. Something would have to be done about repairing my face and hair before Lucky saw me. I slid down off the bed, and stood there trying to shake the used-up feeling out of my head.

"Oh, dear, Lucky," I called through the door. "Where did you bring the body?"

A chuckle came from outside.

"I've been entertaining you in my flat, madam. Have you enjoyed yourself? Are you ready for breakfast?"

"I'm starving," I said. "But what I want much more than food is a bath and a looking-glass."

"Come out of this door, turn left, and it's the door facing you. There's a big dressing-gown in there for you—unless you prefer to have breakfast in evening dress. I'll order up breakfast for half an hour from now."

I heard the sound of him walking away, and a door shutting. I opened the bedroom door, and went along the short passage into the bathroom. There was a big, clean bath-towel ready there, and I ran the bath full of lovely steaming hot water. Then I locked the door, and slipped off my clothes, and got into the bath and lay down luxuriously with the water up to my neck. In five minutes I could feel the newness creeping back into me. After rubbing myself briskly with the towel, I opened my handbag, which by luck or somebody's kindness I still had with me, and after a quarter of an hour's

careful work on my face, I felt I was ready to greet Lucky. So I put on my Kestos and panties, and slipped Lucky's dressing-gown over them, and went out into the passage again.

"Hullo!" I called.

Lucky came out of one of the doors. His eyes were laughing at me.

"Breakfast is served, madam," he said. "Feel like bacon and eggs?"

"I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself," I answered. "Honestly, it's the first time it's ever happened to me like that. You must have been furious with me. I'll know better next time, I promise."

"Don't worry," said Lucky. "You brought the luck all right, so what else matters? Did that swine Flash lure you into mixing your drinks? He probably thought I'd forget all about you, and leave the coast clear for him."

"But I thought he was a friend of yours."

"I'd prefer to call him an acquaintance. I don't think he has any friends."

"Well—I don't think I ought to blame him, all the same. I'm afraid it was just a straightforward case of getting tight. I never knew it made you feel so awful."

"You'll feel fine when you've eaten this," said Lucky, sitting me down at a table in front of a plate of bacon and egg, and pouring me some coffee.

Coffee had never tasted quite so lovely before. It braced me and heartened me, completing the tonic of my bath. I was hungry now, and I threw all thoughts of my figure aside, eating the egg and bacon at full speed, and following it up with three pieces of toast and butter and marmalade. Lucky left me to it, while he sat in an armchair and looked through the morning papers. When I had finished eating, he tossed a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches over to me.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Perfect," I said.

"Sleep well?"

"You ought to know."

"Well, I tapped on the door at regular hourly intervals from nine o'clock onwards. It's nearly twelve now."

"Nearly twelve?" I had forgotten all about the time. "Well . . ." I paused feeling a bit silly sitting there in his dressing-gown. "I must be going."

"Oh—must you really?" Lucky jumped up, acting with an exaggerated courtesy. "Now let me see—where did you put your gloves and your sponge-bag?"

I laughed. "Instead of a taxi, you'd better call me that bath-tub that they drive around to advertise geysers."

"Can't you simply go home with the milk? Don't they have an afternoon delivery in your district?"

"Just in nice time for tea. But really, Lucky—I shall feel an awful idiot going home in an evening frock at this hour of the day."

"You can't do it," Lucky decided. "There are two alternatives. You can wait till tonight, till such an hour as your evening dress becomes the approved thing again, or you can get hold of some day clothes."

"Day clothes," I sighed. "They never seem so precious as when you're caught without them at midday. But how *can* I get hold of them?"

Lucky jerked his head.

"There's the 'phone," he said. "What more do you need?"

"It's no good my 'phoning, because there's nobody there to answer it."

"There's more than one place to 'phone to. I'll do it for you."

He picked up the telephone directory and started flipping the pages over. "p q r . . . r e . . . r e n . . . here we are!"

He shut the book and dialled a number, while I stared at him, wondering what he was up to. I soon knew.

"Is that Revare's?" he asked.

I jumped to my feet and dived at him across the room. I simply couldn't let him do any more of that. Reaching over his shoulder, I clamped my hand over the mouthpiece of the 'phone.

"Lucky! Don't be ridiculous! I've already got a whole room full of things which I've really no business to have at all. I won't allow you to do it again. Really I won't. I . . ."

But Lucky had laid the receiver down on the table, and turned round to me, and now with a quick movement he put one arm behind my shoulders and the other behind my knees, and lifted me clean off my feet.

"Don't argue," he said.

He started to carry me across the room towards an armchair. I would have struggled to stop him, except that the dressing-gown was trying to fall open all the way down from the girdle, and I had to grab it quickly and hold it closed. He poised me above the armchair, holding me there for a moment. I could feel the gentle strength of his arms, and my heart jumped a couple of times. My face was turned upwards to his. Instinctively, I parted my lips and waited for his to come to them.

But the friendly, bantering smile was all he gave me. The

kind of moment that so many men would have seized upon, he only chuckled at. Suddenly, he took his arms away so that I went bouncing down into the armchair.

"Don't argue," he repeated. Then he walked back and picked up the 'phone again.

"Revare's? I'm sorry to keep you waiting. Is that the manageress? A Miss Burns bought some things from you. I think it was the day before yesterday. You remember? Good. You have a pretty good recollection of her size? Then will you please send round to this address immediately a complete daytime outfit for her. Yes—everything. Wait a minute—I'll find out." He covered the mouthpiece, and turned to me. "What size shoes do you take?"

I didn't argue. It wasn't any use.

"Five," I told him. He turned back to the 'phone.

"Five," he said. "This is very urgent. You'll send someone over specially with them, will you? Try not to be more than an hour. Thank you."

He hung up, and came over and sat down opposite me.

"You see how easy it all is? I hope they send something you like. Anyway, it will mean you don't run off with my dressing-gown."

"Lucky," I said. "I don't want any more clothes. I can't take any more clothes from you. I ought never to have taken any in the first place."

Lucky smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said. "You must please yourself. Do you mind if I have my dressing-gown?"

He held out his hand towards me, as if he expected me to take it off and give it to him then and there. But I caught the flicker in his eyes, and we both burst out laughing.

"Sorry," I said. "But that is the one article of clothing that I insist on having from you at the moment."

"Aha! So you're *asking* me for clothes now!"

"Just a bare covering for a poor destitute girl, kind sir."

"Granted," he said, with a wave of the hand. "And in return I demand—no more arguments."

"I'm in no position to bargain at the moment," I laughed. "But just you wait!"

He tossed one of the newspapers on to my lap for me to look at. "I only hope we don't have to wait too long," he said. "The lunch they send up here is usually terribly dull."

I had been burning to ask some questions about this place that he lived in, and this gave me an opportunity of doing so without appearing too nosey.

"Do they send meals up here, then?"

"I've got an arrangement with a little restaurant just round the corner. It's only a few yards away. They send up breakfast, and occasionally I 'phone them and get other meals sent up."

"It isn't a service flat?"

"No. It's first floor, but with its own front door on to the street, with a staircase down to it. What I don't like about service flats is that the porters and maids have all got pass keys. It means your flat isn't really private."

"You live here alone, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"It's an awfully nice flat," I said.

"Plenty of room, certainly," he said. "You can come and live here if you like. Much handier than where you are now."

He said it quite casually. He might have been asking me to dinner. It seemed to take several seconds before I realized what he had said. And then, as it sank in, and I lifted my head and stared at him, he had turned to his paper again, and was no longer even looking at me.

I went on staring at him, trying to make him out. It was just impossible. Your plans, all the things you had often idly thought about, they weren't any good with Lucky. Some day, maybe a man would ask you that. There would be a cheap twist to his lips, and out of his eyes would peep a furtive body-greed. You would know he had asked a dozen women before you. It wasn't specially you he wanted, it was just the shape of a woman. All right. You would know what to do. You weren't cheap, you weren't a fool, you would know what to do. And you would laugh a lot about it afterwards. Or perhaps it would be different from that, a bit nicer than that. Someone you liked very, very much; someone whose kisses were soft and sweet to you, someone in whose arms you lay and dreamed. He would stumble with his words. He would be frightened lest you were annoyed with him. Poor darling, he was real and sincere, and it was just that he thought having a mistress was the most romantic thing. You would not be annoyed, you would even still kiss him, but again you would know what to do. You had your life to live; not only the next few months, but the whole of your life to live. You would know what to do. The answers were ready, stored away for when they were needed.

But when it was a man who had never stripped you with his eyes, who had never so much as tried to kiss you, and who picked up a newspaper before you had time to answer, you found you hadn't got the answer ready.

Before I could make up my mind whether he was serious or not, there was a ring at the bell. Lucky jumped up and went out into the hall, and I heard him running down some stairs. Then there were voices, and the sound of two people coming back up the stairs, and Lucky popped his head round the door and said: "The respectable attire has arrived. Modom is waiting to dress you in the bedroom."

I only hesitated for a second. It seemed childish to go on arguing. I got up and went across the passage, into the room where I had woken up that morning. A girl, one of the head girls from Revare's, was unpacking a large suitcase.

"Good morning, madam," she said. "I have brought two suits for you to choose from. I think you will be able to walk straight into either of them, but if there are some little adjustments needed we can make them afterwards, of course. Would you like to try the stockings first?"

I began to feel a bit like the Queen of Sheba, and wondered whether I ought to pinch myself, as I kicked off Lucky's slippers and slid the expensive stockings up my legs. Then I examined the suits. One was a black smooth cloth with a white fleck in it, and the other was a dark brown corduroy with a very short jacket and severe neck.

"If the corduroy fits me—that's the one," I said.

It looked even nicer when it was on me. The skirt wanted taking up just a tiny bit, but I could keep it well up at the waist for the time being.

"Here's a hat to match," said the girl, "or you may prefer the gentle contrast of this dark-green turban."

I nodded. "The turban," I murmured. Perhaps I was Aladdin. I nodded, and things came true. I waited while the girl packed the other things back into the suitcase, together with my evening frock which she promised to send home for me. Then I went back into the lounge to find Lucky

"How do you like me this way?" I asked.

He smiled his approval.

"Better each time," he said. "Are you ready for some lunch?"

"I couldn't eat much," I said. "I've only just had breakfast."

"We'll go somewhere light."

Over lunch, he made no reference to the thought that was filling my mind. We talked about food, about the people we saw sitting around us, about films we had both seen and liked. But not until we were standing in the street outside, with me about to leave him and go back to my flat at Streatham,

did he mention anything again. And when he spoke, it was with the same dispassionate detachment that he always seemed to use just when you were most longing for something else.

"You're bringing me luck," he said. "You're the luckiest thing I've ever had around me. Together, you and I can make a fortune. There's no stopping us. It's too big a thing to miss, Jo."

I was standing, looking up at his face, grabbing each word he said and trying to make it tender. My lips were apart, and my breathing was strained and jerky the way it is when you are listening with your heart.

"I wish you could throw yourself right into this thing, Jo," he went on. "You could treat it as a job. You could call it a career. Sometimes, there would be games at a moment's notice. If you were on the spot, you would be as dependable as a charm tied round my neck—and a thousand times more potent."

He broke off, suddenly beckoned a taxi, opened the door for me, and gave the driver some money.

"So long," he said with a smile. "Think it over. It would be handier for both of us."

He stood away, and the taxi started with a jerk.

I had been in bed for hours, but not asleep. The same bewildering questions went on weaving through my head, dodging and ducking whenever an answer came near. How often, I wondered, had people been faced with the finding of such an answer? And how did they ever know whether they had answered for the best? You wanted to be near him, that was all you knew. Irresistibly, you wanted to go to him, to weave your spell over him so that he would want you too. But that was the easy answer; it wasn't an answer at all. When you were quite a kid, they used to laugh and say that some man would want to marry you some day. They talked about "choosing yourself a handsome husband". When you heard about other people getting married, it all sounded easy and straightforward. They loved each other, they were "suited" to each other, they were every blessed thing. But you were a kid, and they were other people. Gradually, you found things were not so easy to decide. Men asked you to marry them, yes. But what were you to say, how were you to know? The neat, stiff-white-collared young man who was said to be getting on so nicely at the bank—perhaps you should have said yes to him. He seemed to love you very much. He would probably give you babies, and even help to keep them amused. People would have called it a nice,

respectable marriage. They wouldn't have worried about your heart being cold. They wouldn't have cared if you spent your life wanting to scream. You would have been nicely settled for life, and nobody would have needed to worry about you any more. Perhaps you should have said yes. You could never be sure. However wide open your eyes were today, you could not see into tomorrow. But other people could not see for you, either. Nobody's advice was ever any good. That night in the summer a long time ago, when you lay in the sand dunes in the arms of a man you had never seen before, just because you felt gay and free and you liked his laugh—they would say that was asking for trouble. But trouble never came. You didn't have a baby. And, contrary to all the rules, you somehow didn't have regrets about it afterwards. You were warmer inside than you had ever been before. For weeks afterwards, you went around knowing that your eyes were somehow softer.

But that was a fluke, of course. You were crazy and you knew it. It wasn't clever or romantic to start going around like that. It might have been dreadful. Anything might have happened. You didn't have to be attractive to get the chance of doing that. Any dark night on Putney Heath you could see the plainest, dowdiest creatures with men plodding doggedly after them. It made you feel ashamed and sick. Men were all the same. They used different techniques, but they were all pretty much the same. If they had a bit of money, they dressed the occasion up, and suggested you lived with them in a stinking little flat somewhere. The only ones who were any good were those steady, stiff-white-collared, save-up-for-the-furniture kind of— Oh! how they made you want to scream!

Life had to be planned. It was a long time, life was. It was middle-age and old-age, as well as a few weeks of heaven. Just because you wanted to be near someone, just because you felt weak at the knees when you looked at him, that was no excuse for being a fool about it. Once you lived with a man, it was never the same again.

I could be with Lucky now. Right at this moment I could be with him. Near him, always near him, that's where I belong. I can feel it inside me. To hell with anything else! Peggy would say it was mad. She'd say it wouldn't pay. To hell with Peggy! This is a thing for me to decide, and only me. It's not something that you think out, it's something that you *feel*. It's like someone putting a hand inside you and suddenly squeezing your heart. You can't do anything.

Some day you have to decide. You can drift along, the old drab way, until in the end you say yes to a man just to have a roof over your head without working all your life. You have everything, except the magic. Or you can take the magic, and risk not having anything else. You have to decide. Sometimes you get it both ways. If Lucky asked me to marry him, I'd be lifted straight to heaven.

Lucky *will* ask me to marry him. The way I feel, it's so beautiful that it couldn't possibly not come true. Of course he'll ask me. That is what he means. He doesn't know me well enough, he doesn't like to ask me yet. But he will. His eyes will be soft and gentle. He will move very close to me, touch me somewhere with his hand. He will speak in that funny casual way of his, as if what he was saying didn't really matter. And then we shall suddenly both burst out laughing. We shall be so happy. We shall walk through the streets hand in hand. Not actually hand in hand, of course, but that is what it will feel like. All the people who pass us will have smiles on their faces, like Bank Holiday. We shall flit together from place to place, changing friendly words with everyone, laughing all the time. And when the night comes we shall walk again, but quieter now. Down by the river, I think. The lights will be dancing on the water, but slower and slower as the world goes to sleep. The moon will come up to greet us. The stars will be bigger and nearer than ever before. We shall stand there, side by side, together, knowing things we never knew before.

He won't marry me. No man ever does if you live with him first. Everybody says so. I'll tell Peggy about it, see what she says. Peggy's got her head screwed on better than I have. She'll tell me to snap out of this dreamy schoolgirl stuff. She'll be right, too. She knows what she's talking about.

I know what Peggy will say, and I'm damned if I'll mention it to her at all. What's it got to do with her? What does she know about Lucky and me? She'll think it's just the ordinary thing. She won't know the difference. She won't know that every time she opens her mouth she'll be slapping me across the heart.

I could be with Lucky now. I could be near him, seeing him, hearing him. You come to a moment in your life when nothing else matters. You can choose between being miserably sensible, or foolishly happy. I want to be happy. I've got my own life to live. I want to be near Lucky. I don't care. I don't care. I want to be near Lucky.

I lay there in bed till the morning came, till my mind was too tired to think any more. I pretended to be asleep while Peggy dressed and snatched her breakfast and hurried off to her office. Then I got up, and slowly had a bath, and made some coffee, and dialled his number on the 'phone.

"Can you lend me a trunk?" I asked him.

CHAPTER V

THE THINGS A MOTHER IS SUPPOSED TO TELL YOU, THEY DON'T always need knowing. You can make up your mind to something, you can bite off a lump of the future, and then suddenly find that it is not what you thought it was at all.

That's the way it was. Lucky was charming. He was sweet and attentive and generous. He gave me a brand new world, complete in every detail. I told myself at the end of a week that no girl could ask for more. It was just that it was different from what I thought it was going to be.

My room was the one I had woken up in that morning. His was the other side of the passage. That was nice, that was what you would expect with Lucky. He would never be crude. The knock at my door the first morning was not Lucky's, it was followed by the voice of someone from the restaurant. Would I have breakfast brought into the room, or was I getting up for it? That was nice, too. I would get up, I said. I couldn't lie in bed just sort of waiting. Lucky would much prefer that I should get up and join him for breakfast and be perfectly natural about everything.

He had his breakfast in bed. Oh, well—he was probably tired. We had been out fairly late the night before. He wouldn't guess that I was getting up to breakfast. If he had known, he would have got up, too, so that we could have had breakfast together, and perhaps talked about the news or something, the way people do when they have breakfast together. When he heard that I had got up, he would do so too the next morning. He would want to see me, soon as I was about, just to say hullo. A friendly, all-at-ease breakfast together was one of the things. He was tired this morning. I felt sure he would be up tomorrow.

But it wasn't like that. It was different from what I thought it was going to be. He had said it would be handier for both of us, and that seemed to be exactly all he meant. I tried. I couldn't help it, I just had to. With all the lovely stockings and filmy things I had got from Revare's, I tried to make him see me. But it wasn't any good. He was just the

same as he had been all along; perfect in every way, except that he didn't see me the way that I saw him.

He gave me a marvellous time. We went to all the restaurants that I had always wanted to go to, and lots that I had never heard of. He spent money lavishly, almost throwing it about. And often in the evenings we would suddenly grab a taxi and hurry off to somewhere for him to gamble. He always seemed to come home with much more money than he took with him, and every time he would insist that it was entirely due to the wonderful luck I brought him. All that part of it was perfect.

There were evenings, as well as long periods in the daytime, when I did not see him at all. He just used to disappear, without giving me any idea of where he was going or what he was doing. He would often come home very late at night, so that even if I had been to a late cinema and had some supper out somewhere afterwards, I would still have been in bed for hours by the time I heard him come into the flat. I wondered if he had been gambling, and if so, why he had not taken me with him. Somehow, I didn't like to ask him, for fear he might think me prying. One night, I sat up waiting for him. I kept the kettle on the gas stove, thinking he would like me to make him some coffee or tea when he came in. I waited till half past four in the morning. By then I was far too tired to be gaily welcoming, but that didn't matter. He would not have wanted it. He came into the room slowly, wearily, his eyes simply miles away. He saw me in the chair there, and nodded in a way that just took me for granted, neither pleased nor annoyed that I had waited up for him. He lighted a cigarette, and sat down in a chair without saying a word. He looked so strange I didn't like to speak. He was like a man in a dream, a fierce and furious dream. He dragged at his cigarette in short, vicious jerks. His hands kept closing tight, opening, closing. You could see he was living through the evening again. I guessed he had been losing; but why he hadn't taken me, I could not imagine. When we went together, he came home gay and pleased with everything. When we reached the flat, the first thing he did was to open the safe that was in the wall behind the bookcase, and put a bundle of money into it. He had told me that he didn't like banks, preferring to have all his money in cash. Tonight, I suddenly realized, he had not opened the safe. That was why he was looking like that. He must have been losing badly. I longed to ask him why he had not taken me. I wanted to go across and sit on the arm of his chair, and to tell

him how sorry I was he had lost, to talk to him softly and gently and make him feel better about it all. But something about the look of him made me frightened to break the silence; and after a while he got up and muttered a curt good night, and went into his bedroom and shut the door.

But I wasn't left wondering about those nights for long. Usually, he had recovered his good spirits by the morning. But one day, after one of his late, lonely nights, he sat about the flat glowering all day, until about tea-time, when he suddenly snapped himself to life again and said:

"Jo—can you face a nasty sort of evening to help me?"

It felt like somebody handing me orchids on a gold plate. To help him, to be able to do something to ease the tautness out of him, to be suddenly *needed* by him, it was all I wanted.

"I'll do anything, Lucky."

"It won't be nice, but I need your luck very badly."

"I'll do anything."

"I didn't ever mean to take you to the money game. It's not the kind of place for you. But lately, they've been pushing me round badly. I lost more yesterday evening than I've won all the last half-dozen times we've been to the cards and roulette together. I've got to change my luck."

"But why didn't you take me before?"

"Because it's not your kind of place. I must warn you, If you come, you'll need your eyes open. It isn't always pretty."

"But I don't mind, Lucky. I'll do anything. I'll come anywhere."

"They don't allow women in. That's the first fence we've got to get over. You can leave that part to me. But once you're there, just keep your ears shut and behave like a log of wood. You won't like it, I can promise you now—you won't like it. But as long as you can stick it out, I need all the luck you can bring."

"When do we go, Lucky?"

"Tonight. Don't doll yourself up too nicely. The drabber you look, the better they'll leave you alone."

We set off at half-past seven, stopping at a restaurant to eat on the way. Lucky had looked at me carefully before we left the flat, and had asked me if I would mind taking off most of my lipstick. It wasn't because he didn't like it. He thought it looked nice. It was because of the other people who would be there, he explained. He didn't want me to be too noticeable. He was glad I had taken his tip and put on a not-very-new woollen frock and the coat I used to wear for going to the office.

This time, it was not a fashionable street. It was a drab, blind alley that Lucky led the way to, somewhere round the back of Tottenham Court Road. He knocked on a door that badly wanted painting. It seemed to be a signal; three quick knocks, then a pause, then two more. We waited in the pitch-dark shadow, and then heard footsteps coming. The door opened. There was no light in the hall, and it took a second or two before you could make out the burly figure of a man. He was peering into the darkness, too. He recognized Lucky. Then his eyes found the outline of me. When he spoke, it sounded like a hack-saw working.

"No skirts," was what he said. .

"That's all right, Bennett," said Lucky. "I've brought her as a mascot. There's nothing else to it. She isn't going to play."

"You're right, she isn't. No skirts in here. You know that, Lucky. Beat it, sweetheart, quick!"

I didn't know which of them to look at, but in the dark it didn't make any difference. Lucky was snapping out his words now.

"Don't get her wrong, Bennett. She's not come to play, and she's not come to work any line. She's just what I told you, a mascot. She can stand at the back of the room and no one will know she's there."

"You trying to guy me, Lucky?"

"I'm telling you clear enough. I don't come in without her."

"No skirts. You know the rules. If I let one in, they'd soon be queuing up."

Lucky took a half-step forward. His voice went down to a whisper.

"Keep your dirty tongue off her!"

The answer came quickly, anxiously.

"Nothing personal, Lucky. Your girl's okay, I know that, of course. It's just the rules. You know that, Lucky."

"Skip the rules. If I come in, she comes with me. She'll keep quiet all right."

There was a moment's pause. The man could easily have turned us both away. He must have had good reasons for wanting Lucky to go in. When he spoke again, his voice was smooth and oily.

"All right, Lucky. I wouldn't do it for anybody else, but I know I can trust you: If you've got some money, and you want a nice game—come on in, the both of you."

Lucky took hold of the sleeve of my coat with his fingers, and led me through the doorway. The man shut the door

after us, and we went along the dark passage and turned the corner at the end. A line of light showed from under another door. Lucky paused, gripped my arm for a second, and whispered in my ear.

"Try not to mind it."

The sudden light inside the room was almost blinding after the darkness of the passage. I blinked as I followed the two men through the door. The smoky stuffiness inside was enough to choke you. The place smelt thick and stale. A group of men were standing round a table in the middle of the large room. There was plenty of chairs about, but no one seemed to be using them. Over the table hung a green-shaded lamp, throwing a fierce cone of light downwards through the smoke. It was a peculiar table, covered with green cloth and having a circular wall all round it. A pair of dice lay on the table, and one of the men was throwing some notes down near them.

One or two heads turned round casually as we entered. They saw Lucky first, and called a hullo. Then they saw me.

"What's this? Light refreshment?"

"This is a bit of all right, Bennett."

Lucky ignored the remarks, and drew me over to a chair away from the table.

"Sorry it's not more comfortable," he said. "Sit down and think of sevens all the time."

The extra casual tone of his voice was put on to hide things up. But I could sense the difference in him. He wasn't natural now, he seemed to be deliberately controlling himself. Even his movements were stiff and forced. It was the other Lucky now. This was the one who leapt into the taxi that first evening. This was the one whose eyes had cut right through me when I did the wrong thing with my glass and cigarette. I wasn't frightened. There was nothing to be scared of. But I felt a little flicker inside as I breathed.

He turned round abruptly to go over to the table, and came face to face with a man who had walked over towards us. I recognized Flash. The professional smile was there as he leaned round Lucky to look at me.

"Delightful!" he exclaimed. "The charming Miss Burns. I was wondering when we should meet again. I call it very unselfish of Lucky to allow his friends to share his treasure like this."

I glanced at Lucky. He was frowning at Flash. I didn't quite know what to say. Lucky saved me the trouble by butting in at him.

"This isn't any social occasion. You came here to play, didn't you? Let's play, then."

He said it like giving an order. A sudden shadow came into Flash's eyes. You could see the quick hate inside him. But he covered it up again at once, and smiled smoothly.

"Yes," he said. "Let's play. That will be fun."

They walked across to the table, leaving me sitting there alone. I looked at the other men who were grouped round the table. They weren't the kind you see in church. They mixed shabby suits with big diamond tie-pins. Two of them had on those collars with stripes coming downwards instead of round. They stood in slouching attitudes, some of them leaning their weight against the table. Most of their faces were white and hard, as if they lived their lives at night.

Lucky sidled over and whispered something to a fattish man with a ragged moustache. He was chewing a cigar that had gone out. He listened, and then glanced over at me, and nodded to Lucky.

"Leave it to Doc," I heard him say.

Lucky turned his attention to what was happening at the table. For a while he only watched. Sometimes a man from the bunch would turn his head round and throw me a leer, trying to catch my eye. But I kept my gaze steadily away from anyone who looked at me. The rattle of the dice in someone's hands was followed by the dull clatter of them as they ran across the table and bounced back from the green wall.

"Nine!"

There was a moment's silence as the man picked up the dice again. Then I heard Lucky's voice.

"Fifty you don't find it."

The man with the dice looked round at him.

"You got fifty?"

Lucky put a hand in his pocket and tossed something on to the table.

"You know better than to ask me that," he said.

"Sorry. But after last night"—the man shrugged his shoulders—"I just didn't know it was unlimited, that's all."

He rattled the dice in his hands.

"You're on, Lucky. Nine to find, eh? That's easy. Annie likes me. Annie comes when I call her. Come on, Annie! Nice Annie!"

The dice clattered down. He picked them up again, rattled them, threw them down again. He muttered impatiently, and rattled them longer next time. Then he lifted his closed

hand up to his mouth and kissed it noisily. "Sweet Annie! Kind Annie! Come now, Annie!"

He threw the dice again, and then turned round triumphantly, smiling unpleasantly at Lucky.

"Annie lives with me," he said, as he picked the money up. "Throwing for a hundred," he went on, tossing the money back on to the table.

"It's full," said Lucky, pulling more notes out of his pocket. The man picked up the dice again and rattled them. As they clattered on the table, I suddenly became aware of someone standing in front of me.

"Can you use a bit of company?"

I just had time to look at his sagging face and shudder. Then, slightly between him and me edged the man I had seen Lucky whisper to. He beamed at me happily, removing his cigar a few inches from his mouth and revealing a stained set of teeth.

"Dear lady," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Doc. I'm one of Lucky's pals. He asked me to keep in the neighbourhood in case you should happen to need me."

His smile never moved as he turned round towards the other man. He just stood there, beaming at him, saying nothing. The other man's face went sour. For a moment I thought he was going to hit Doc. Then he tightened the muscles of his face, and pulled his lips back.

"Lucky ain't everybody," he said softly. "Some day he's going to find that out."

If possible, Doc's beaming smile became even broader. He might have been standing surrounded by a crowd of happy children. The other man looked at him hard for a minute, and then, with a sneering deliberation, he turned round and moved back to the table. Doc's smile came back to me. He made a slight movement like a bow, put his cigar back into his mouth, and without saying another word, he too went back and merged into the group round the table.

Lucky was holding the dice now. I leaned to one side, so as to see his face. It looked set and hard, and his eyes were far too bright. He jerked the dice across the table.

"Snake-eye!"

Lucky's mouth seemed to shut tighter than ever, as he put some more money on the table, and picked up the dice again. He gave them an extra long shake before he threw them. As they came to rest, there was a gasp.

"Two blasted snake-eyes running! I never seen that before! Where your sevens gone, Lucky?"

The men were watching Lucky, as he pulled from his pocket the notes that he still had left, and counted them slowly.

"Why don't you give it a rest, Lucky? You simply can't stroke them the right way tonight."

Lucky took no notice of the advice. I sat there willing him to stop playing, but not daring to butt in. I watched him lean across and pick the dice up again. He stood there, fingering his money, trying to decide how much to stake.

A voice came drawling through the smoke. It was Flash's voice.

"Tell you what I'll do, Lucky. I'll play you for a hundred against a piece of your girl."

Something seemed to come into the room and fix the place. Even the smoke seemed to hang still. I could feel myself thumping inside, but there wasn't a sound. Everybody waited. Nobody moved or said a word.

The dice fell from Lucky's hand on to the table. He turned very slowly round, till they were standing face to face. Nothing about him showed what he was thinking, what he was going to do.

Then it happened quickly. Lucky's left hand jerked forward into Flash's stomach. Flash's arms went down to protect himself, and his head came forward. Then he got it. From somewhere round behind his shoulder, Lucky brought his right fist over, swinging his whole body with it. It crashed across that frightened mouth and seemed to sink right in. Flash sagged back against the table, blood pouring out of his lips. Before there was time to do anything, Lucky had hit him again.

But now the place had woken up. Bennett, the man who had let us in, had run round the table and was pulling Lucky back. There wasn't any need. Flash's legs had doubled up and he was slumped on the floor.

Lucky shook himself away from Bennett's hands.

"Leave me alone. You heard what he said. He asked for it!"

Bennett jerked his head in my direction.

"That's what comes of allowing . . ." but he looked at Flash's face, and didn't say what he was going to. "We can't have this sort of thing in here," he said. "This is a quiet, respectable game. We can't have any of this!"

Lucky's voice came cold and hard.

"If you want to keep the place nice, clear this dirt off the floor." He prodded Flash's body with his foot. "Somebody take him away before I stamp on him."

A man shuffled forward, looking at Lucky with all the hate he dared.

"I'll take him along," he said. "Will you give me a hand to the street with him, Bennett?"

Together they lifted him up. He was conscious, but nearly collapsing. They lugged him through the door, and somebody kicked it shut behind them. Lucky took a handkerchief and wiped the back of his hand. The handkerchief was blotched with red as he put it back into his pocket. He picked up the dice again, and laid some money on the table.

"Who's playing it?" he asked. His voice was a challenge. Several of the men had been glancing across at me, but Lucky had not even turned his head my way. He behaved as if the game were the only thing he was conscious of. Now the others quickly threw money on to the table, splitting up the stake between them, all eager to back their luck against his. With lowered voices, tenser than before, the game went on. Bennett came back into the room, scowled across at me, but said nothing. The dice were passed from man to man. The money swayed this way, that way, back again. It started to come to Lucky. I could see him changing. His face wasn't quite so set, his eyes were easing. There were flashes again of his bantering tone as he called out his bets. My hopes began to rise again. I sat there hoping and wishing and even praying that he should win. But the streak did not last. He started to stiffen and tighten his face again. Throw after throw went against him. A peculiar hush came over the men as he went on losing, losing.

His last note went down on the table, and next minute it was gone. He hesitated. The player next to him looked at him questioningly. Lucky made a gesture with his hand. Then he pointed to the other man's stake on the table, and nodded. The man shook his head. He looked at Lucky and murmured the one word: "Cash."

Lucky shrugged his shoulders, and stood undecided for a moment. Then he turned from the table and walked across to me. His eyes had a peculiar fixed look, so that when they were pointing straight at me I felt he was not seeing me. The tall, well-carried figure seemed to stoop as it came towards me. For a moment, it was like meeting someone you had not seen for years. I got up from my chair and stood there, trying to smile for him. All I could feel was my face twisting awkwardly.

"Lucky!" I whispered. My hand went forward hesitatingly. But when he spoke, his voice was level and calm. It

was not the voice I knew; it was hard and deliberate, like something coming out of a machine.

"Will you please go back to the flat and fetch something for me? Pick up a taxi and be as quick as you can. You know where the safe is. Here is the key. On the top shelf is an envelope with money in it. That's what I want."

He was holding out the key to me. With my eyes fixed on his, I took it from him. I wanted to plead with him. I wanted to tell him not to risk losing any more. I wanted to take him home and smooth the hardness out of his face and tell him that nothing really mattered. But the way he looked now, you couldn't say a word to him. I opened my handbag and put the key inside it.

"I can't come with you," he said, "because I must watch the way the game goes. Hurry, won't you!"

He opened the door into the passage for me. Bennett saw that I was going, and led the way in the dark to the street door. I went out into that creepy alleyway, and ran as fast as I could along to the street at the end. It was late now, and the traffic had thinned to a mere trickle, but I was lucky enough to see a tired-looking taxi crawling towards me. I hailed it, gave the address of the flat, and told the man to hurry. When we reached the flat, I kept the taxi waiting while I ran upstairs, moved the little bookcase away from in front of the safe, and slipped the key in the lock. I pulled the door open, and saw a long, fat envelope on the top shelf. I put the envelope into my handbag and closed the safe again. But just as I was going to switch off the light in the room, I hesitated, and took the envelope out of my handbag again. I could not resist it—I just wanted to have some rough idea about it. But when I had pulled the contents of the envelope half way out, and flipped my thumb across the notes to get an idea of the number, it scared me to know that I had to carry that much money. I didn't count it carefully, but there were hundreds and hundreds of pounds. I slid the notes back into the envelope, paused with my bag open, and then shut the bag and slipped the envelope down inside my jumper. I could feel it against my skin, and I felt safer that way. All the way back in the taxi I kept putting my hand down and feeling the envelope, just to make extra certain. I did not know the address of the place, so I told the taxi driver to take me back to where he had picked me up. Then I pointed out the alleyway to him, and he drove me right up into it. I ran up to the door, and gave the same taps on it that I remembered Lucky giving. Bennett opened the door, and it

was not until he had shut it again behind me that I felt safe about the money. As I followed him along the passage, I quickly fished the envelope out from my jumper and put it into my handbag.

Lucky was standing by the table, watching the game, as I entered the room. He came quickly across to me, holding out his hand for the money. I handed him the envelope. He thanked me with a jerky nod of his head, and motioned to the chair I had been sitting on all the evening. I sat down. He took the money out of the envelope, stuffed the notes loosely into his side pocket, and started playing again.

It still went wrong. I watched the steady journeys of his hand to his pocket. The flow of the money was outwards all the time. Nobody was talking now. The cries, the comments, the strange strings of words that were meant to coax the dice—they were all stopped now. The smoky room was tired and hushed and eerie. The rustle of notes and the rattle of dice were the only sounds.

Suddenly, dice in hand, Lucky paused. He looked round the table, searching for Bennett, and found him.

"Bennett," he said. "I told you the girl hadn't come to play. That still goes. But I want her to throw the dice for me. Okay?"

Bennett glanced quickly at me, then back at Lucky, then slowly round all the faces at the table. The men were all looking at Lucky, as if wondering when the stream of money would come to an end. Bennett hesitated. He knew there wasn't a man round the table who wanted to raise any objections which might stop the game. Every pocket in that ragged circle was lined with Lucky's money.

"Okay."

Lucky turned, and beckoned with his head. I walked across and stood by the side of him. The men shuffled round to make room. Lucky held out the dice, and dropped them into my hand.

"They have to run across the table and bounce back from the side," he explained curtly. Then, earnestly and persuasively, he whispered: "Try to throw seven."

I rattled them in my hand, and sent them shooting across the green table. They hit the wall, bounced back, and stopped. It was two ones.

"Snake eyes!" Lucky spat the words out as if he hated them. A man at the other side picked up the money. Lucky reached over for the dice again. He handed them to me, and put five ten-pound notes on to the table. He waited, as the

other men made up their minds. Five of them each put one ten-pound note down. He whispered to me again.

"Seven. Six-and-a-one, five-and-a-two, or four-and-a-three."

I sent them rattling down again. Two fours.

"Eight to find. Try to throw eight. Two fours, five-and-a-three, or six-and-a-two."

I threw nine, then six, then five, then ten. He kept handing me the dice again. The money was still on the table. I gave them a long shake, and sent them bouncing hard against the little wall. One stopped at six. The other was one. Six and one—seven! I felt a smile breaking on my face. I was doing it for him!

But the other men were picking up the notes. And the tone of Lucky's voice soon took the smile away.

"Craps!"

I looked up at him. "But . . ."

"You were trying for eight. Maybe you'd better go."

His voice and his eyes were fierce, but not with me. I didn't see how it could be me. I looked up at him, longing to say something to him, longing to do something to help him, longing to see some softness and hope in him somewhere. But his eyes were back on the table as the next man picked up the dice. I turned and walked slowly across to the door.

It was nearly daylight when I heard the sound of a key in the door downstairs. I sat in the armchair, stiff and still, somehow not daring to move. Two pairs of footsteps climbed the stairs, and came slowly along the passage. The door opened. First it was Lucky, then Doc.

They took no notice of me. They took no notice of anything. Lucky flopped down in the other armchair and stared into the electric fire. Doc went over to a cabinet, and poured some whisky into two glasses, and handed one to Lucky without a word. The beaming smile was a permanent thing on Doc's face, but there wasn't any humour in it now.

Doc broke the silence. "I'll be getting along," he said.

Lucky turned his head and looked at him. He wasn't looking at anything, but he pointed his face at him. Then he held out his hand for something.

"Sleepers," he said.

Doc took a tube from his pocket, and counted out three tablets into Lucky's hand.

"Take two now. The third one not before you've been in bed at least three hours."

He glanced at me. I thought his peculiar beaming face gave me a tiny nod. Then he went out of the room, and I heard him go downstairs and through the street door.

We sat in dead silence. I wondered if Lucky knew I was there. I was frightened of him being so still and quiet, and yet frightened too of what he might say if he spoke. At last he stirred himself. He put two of the tablets into his mouth and washed them down with the last of his whisky. Then he got up and walked very slowly towards the door and opened it. For an awful moment I thought he was not going to take any notice of me at all. Then he turned, with his hand on the door, and faced towards me.

"I'm cleaned," he said.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS LATE IN THE MORNING WHEN I WENT ON TIP-TOE across the passage and listened at his door. He wasn't moving, and when I strained my ears I could just hear the steady breathing of sleep. I turned the handle, quietly as I could, and went into the room. He was lying on the bed, still in all his clothes, but sleeping heavily now. I stood there, looking down at him, wondering what was in his mind, hoping that was sleeping too. I wanted to touch him, to kiss him softly as he slept, but I did not dare for fear of waking him. He looked very lonely lying there. No matter how many people he knew, and even with me living here within reaching distance, there was something about him that was lonely all the time. Somewhere, just inside him, the shutters were always down. I could be comforting him now. I could be putting soft, gentle arms around him, helping to take the tiredness out of him, helping him to find his smile again. This was a time, if ever there was one, when a woman could help a man. But not when it was Lucky. The one time I had tried to kiss him—in a fit of despairing of him ever trying to kiss me—he had jerked away, almost as if he were frightened of me. Then into his eyes had suddenly come a blazing hardness, until it was I who was feeling frightened of him. It had been over in a moment. Almost the very next second he had been making a special point of being courteous and friendly. But the memory of his fleeting look kept me standing upright now by the side of his bed.

I stood looking at him for several minutes. Then I went quietly out of his room again. I took my bath, and dressed slowly, being careful all the time not to make any noise that

would wake him up. He was still asleep by the time I had finished dressing, and I put some coffee in the percolator on the stove, so that I could give him some in bed when he woke up. The kitchen of the flat had been virtually unused when I went there, but I had ordered in some simple things so that I could make it seem more like home for him.

He was stirring as I went into the room this time. I hurried out again and fetched the coffee, carrying it in with two cups on a tray. He passed a hand slowly across his forehead, and pushed his fingers through his tousled hair. He looked surprised to see me there, but he made no comment about it.

"Hullo," I said.

"Hullo."

I put the tray down on the little table by the side of his bed.

"Feel like some coffee?"

"Thanks."

He said it with that peculiar way he had of treating unexpected things as if he had known they were going to happen. He watched me casually as I filled the two cups, handed one to him, gave him a cigarette and lighted it for him, and then sat down on a chair near the bed, with my cup balanced on my knee. Lying propped up on one elbow, he sipped the hot coffee slowly, thoughtfully. But when he spoke, it was nothing whatever to do with what his thoughts had been about.

"I don't usually sleep in my clothes like this. In fact I have a natural inclination towards pyjamas at night. Perhaps something told me that I was going to have company for coffee, and that I had better remain suitably attired."

The same detached voice. The same self-control that hardly ever left him for a moment. The shutters were down.

I didn't say anything. I just sat looking at him, waiting for him to say the things he wanted and needed to say. He finished his coffee and I poured him out some more. He finished his cigarette and I lighted another one for him. And after a while his eyes came from miles away until they seemed quite near to me.

"I wasn't sure you'd still be here," he said.

"Didn't you—want me to be?"

He smiled.

"One way yes. One way no."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't quite know," he said slowly.

"But Lucky—you didn't mean to send me away last night, did you? Not away altogether?"

"I don't see why you should need sending. You saw the way things were going last night. When I came back, I told you what had happened. I meant it. It was true. There's nothing to stay for."

"Nothing to stay for?" I wished I could stop that horrid trembling feeling inside me.

"Nothing," he said. "Everything's gone. I lost my head, and got caught in the stream like a fool. Well—there it is. You and I made a bargain. I can't keep my part of it. There's nothing to stay for."

I shook my head. "We didn't make any bargain, Lucky," I said. "I'm here because I wanted to come, that's all. You asked me to come because you thought I'd be good luck. If I've let you down about that, I . . ."

I had to stop speaking, to pinch my lips tight together so as to keep them from wobbling. I couldn't cry. Whatever happened, I couldn't cry. Lucky would hate that more than anything.

He was speaking again.

"You haven't let me down. It's not your fault. I was just a fool. You've turned up the luck enough times. I didn't know how to use it, that was all. There comes a night when you just have to stop playing because it isn't any good. Every gambler knows that. Every gambler waits for that night, watches for it, knowing that it will come. He's got to see it when it comes. He's got to recognize it. He mustn't fight against it. It's the trap that waits to catch the fools who think they're stronger than chance. Nobody's stronger than chance. You can woo her, and she smiles. But if you snap your fingers at her, she kills you dead. Everybody knows that. Nobody understood it better than I did. It was there, last night, the trap she sets for everyone. I knew it, I could see it, I could feel it. And yet I went on. I don't know why, but I went on. Right to the end."

He was looking straight in front of himself now, talking to nobody. His eyes went fiercely across the room and his hands were tight. I put my hand over on to the bed, and touched it against his arm.

"But Lucky—there are plenty more nights. You'll win next time!"

He turned his head towards me.

"You don't understand, Little Jo," he said. His voice was suddenly soft and tired. "The men you saw last night love nothing more than to break someone. They've taken all I've got, and they know it. To them, that means that I

haven't enough stake to get into a big game again, and therefore there's no danger of my winning it back from them."

"Did you lose it absolutely *all*?"

"Except for a few odd pounds."

"But as long as you've got *something* to play with . . ."

He shook his head.

"That miracle stuff never works," he said. "It's never any good trying to make a fortune overnight. Money makes money, but it only makes it gradually. You start with a little, and gradually multiply it over years. And you start with the little games. I don't know where they are any more. I've grown out of them."

"We can find them, Lucky. You've done it once, and you can do it again. Quicker this time, because I'm going to bring you luck, I *know* I am."

Lucky looked very steadily at me.

"It's nice to hear," he said, slowly. "It's nice to be told that someone else has got confidence in you. It's nicer than you can guess. But you're being a little fool, you know. A flattened-out gambler isn't worth tuppence to anyone. I'll have to duck down somewhere. I'll have to get out of this flat and give up everything. There's nothing to stay for, Jo. You'd better go."

But something new and wonderful had come into his voice now. It was there, I was sure it was. It couldn't be just my hoping that had made me think I could hear it. It was not the words, but the way they were said. They were slow and hesitating. They didn't mean quite what they said. The words said go, but the voice—oh, if only it was true what I thought I could hear—the voice was saying stay.

I didn't answer quickly. I didn't want to say anything that might make his hovering mind jump the wrong way. He was tired, terribly tired just now. All that losing the night before, the collapse of his plans, the awful mistake he knew he had made in going on playing—of course he was tired. But soon, very soon, that light-hearted confidence would come back. They couldn't beat Lucky as easily as this. I knew that. As soon as he wasn't so tired, all that despair would vanish. A gay defiance would take its place again. Like the time I first saw him.

Like the time I first saw him? He had been to the dog-racing then. He hadn't mentioned the dogs again since that night. He might have been to them, of course. I didn't know where he went all the time. But it was strange, if he *had* been going to them, why he had not taken me with him.

You could bet with very little money at the dogs. People put on a shilling sometimes, and made quite a lot. Surely, the dog-track was just the place for Lucky to start again in a small way.

But I didn't want to go on discussing it with him just now. I wanted to wait till his spirits had bubbled up again. So after we had sat in his room there in silence for a little while, I suddenly stood up and said:

"You have a bath, Lucky. You'll feel much better after that. Then, when you're dressed, we're going to Percy's Bar—and I am going to buy the drinks."

He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut across him before he could say anything.

"No arguments!" I laughed. And I turned, and went quickly out of his room, and shut the door behind me.

"Two more, please," I told the barman.

Lucky was thawing already. It was no good pretending that he was not worried; but that blankness was going out of him quickly now.

I raised my newly filled glass towards him, and held it there till he brought his up to meet it.

"We're drinking to the next round," I said. "This is the round where you stage a big come-back and knock 'em all silly."

"That's what you think."

"Of course it is. We're an unbeatable team, remember. You said so yourself. And now you've got a more practised mascot than you had before. Look. Left hand for cigarette, right hand for glass. Eyes off the wheel while the ball is spinning. I'm the fully trained article now. Just you dare not to use me properly, Mister Lucky, and I'll go straight off and auction myself to the highest bidder among the Monte Carlo millionaires."

He smiled a little. And just as his eyes were starting to go miles away, he suddenly brought them back to me.

"We *ought* to be able to do it, Jo."

"We ought, and we can. When do we start?"

"Either quickly, or not at all."

"What about the dogs, Lucky? Would it be a good idea to try them?"

"We ought to be able to do it." He simply had not heard my last remark. You could see him stiffen as you watched him. That hard, glinting challenge had come back into his eyes, almost frightening in its fierceness.

"This is only a trip-up, Jo. Nothing can stop us really."

Nobody's going to stand in the way of me and what I want. I'm starting now, and I'm coming up at twice the speed this time." He paused, to drain his glass at a gulp. "Just let them try to take it from me. I'll break them all. I'll build up the stakes till not one of them dares to come in and play."

His voice was strained with his sudden excitement. I looked at him with a tight feeling round my heart. This was the way I liked him most. His confidence was irresistible. I gulped my glass empty, too. Together, as if moved by the same string, we stood up and turned away from the bar and walked towards the door.

"So you think the dogs, do you?" he asked suddenly. I thought he had not heard.

"I only suggested . . ."

"That's fine," he said. "If you're the lucky charm, why shouldn't you choose the game? It's the sensible thing for you to do. We ought to have thought of that before."

But it was the flat that we made for, not the greyhound track. As soon as we got there, he went to the telephone and dialled a number.

"Jimmy? This is Lucky here. . . . Yes, quite a stranger. . . . Oh, still getting around just the same. . . . Now listen, Jimmy. I need one of your best ones, and I need it in a hurry. . . . What? All right! All right! I haven't said anything. I'll be along as soon as you can see me. What's that? . . . Okay. Six o'clock. . . . Yes. The far corner in the long bar. So-long."

He put down the receiver, and turned to me with a laugh. "He gets mad if you try to talk about it over the 'phone. He's scared that someone may happen to hear, and blow his cosy nest all to pieces. I'm meeting him at six. You'd better come, too."

"But isn't betting over the telephone allowed, then?"

I thought he hesitated for a tiny second before he said: "Oh, yes—there's no earthly reason why you shouldn't do it over the 'phone. It's just that he doesn't like it, that's all."

He spoke in the tone of voice which says clearly: "This conversation is finished." I couldn't pester him with questions. He wouldn't like that. But it was with a vague uneasiness in my mind that I walked by his side along Shaftesbury Avenue and into one of the bars of a restaurant there. Lucky led me across to a table right in the far corner, and we sat down and ordered drinks and waited for Jimmy to come. After about ten minutes, Lucky suddenly stood up and waved

a hand across the room towards a well-dressed middle-aged man who had just come in.

"Here he comes. Hullo, Jimmy!" They clapped each other on the shoulder in a hearty greeting, and Lucky turned to introduce me. "This is Mr. James, Jo. Miss Burns."

He removed his hat, and smiled at me pleasantly.

"Jimmy to everybody," he said to me, as he sat down at the table with us. Then, turning to Lucky, and meaning me, he said: "This isn't like you, Lucky."

Lucky smiled. "Jo is my mascot. You know—a kind of lucky charm. Quite accidentally I discovered that she brought me luck, so now she comes with me whenever I'm going to play."

Jimmy roared with laughter.

"That's the thinnest story I've ever heard. But you're the one man, Lucky, that I might believe it from—you superstitious lunatic!"

Lucky beckoned a waiter and ordered. He seemed to know Jimmy well enough to know what he would have to drink.

"Jimmy," he said. "I've been doing a good long spell of straight gambling—the kind you do at tables. But just at the moment I'm badly in need of one of your best tonics."

Jimmy's face went suddenly serious.

"You're not letting your tongue get loose, are you, Lucky?"

"Why?"

Jimmy glanced at me.

"You know I don't like public speeches about business. If we're going to talk, let's go somewhere quiet for it, just you and me."

"She's all right, Jimmy. You know me well enough to know that I wouldn't run any risks. You can drop your guard in front of her. She and I are a business team."

Jimmy looked at me carefully for several seconds. It was easy for me to look back at him. I didn't know what they were talking about. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to Lucky again.

"I'll take your word for it. What is it you want?"

"One of those that you gave me before. I want setting up."

Jimmy shook his head sadly.

"Those were the good old days, Lucky. Things are different now. You can't play monkey the way you used to be able to."

"Good old Jimmy! You're running true to form. You've said that to me every time I can remember."

"But it's true now, Lucky. Things are different. Things are pretty difficult."

"Yes, yes. I know. Lot of expenses, too—eh, Jimmy?"

"I'm serious, Lucky. It isn't the same any more."

"What makes you think I'm not going to pay you for it?"

"I didn't say that, Lucky. I know your dough's all right. I'm just telling you how difficult it is. I'm not saying it's absolutely impossible."

"Ah! The old curmudgeon is beginning to come round at last! Ease up, Jimmy. How soon could you do it?"

Jimmy's face took on a look of intense concentration, and it must have been over a minute that we sat there waiting for him to speak again.

"I might be able to loose one off next Tuesday," he said at last.

"A real one?"

"Now look here, Lucky. Either I do it, or I don't do it. You know that. You know I've never handed you the wrong end of anything yet."

"That's true, you haven't. I trust you more than anyone else, Jimmy."

"Same from me to you, Lucky. I wouldn't take the risk for many guys."

Lucky pulled a pencil and an envelope out of his pocket.

"What's it's name?" he asked.

Jimmy waved the paper away with his hand.

"Put that away," he said. "You know I can't give it to you till the last thing. I'll be loosing it off on Tuesday in the eight-forty. You know the lame newspaper boy on the corner near the gate? At a quarter to seven, buy a paper from him and ask if he has a message for the name of Smith. He will have."

"Right you are, Jimmy. And what's it going to cost?"

"Two hundred quid."

"Two *hundred*?" Lucky made it sound as if he had never heard of so much money.

"It's dirt cheap for the trouble I'll be taking, and the risk I'll be running. And you'll be able to get at least four to one."

Lucky looked at him thoughtfully, as if he were weighing something up in his mind. Then, as if he had suddenly reached a difficult decision, he said:

"It's a lot of money, Jimmy—but I'm not going to argue about the price, because there's just one other little favour I'm going to ask you."

Jimmy looked at him suspiciously.

"Such as——?"

"Just a little loan of the same amount. It's not that I'm out, you understand; but I've got a lot of money tied up for a few days in a business deal, and I'm temporarily short of ready cash."

"Sorry, Lucky." It came out straight away.

Lucky was smiling at him now with all the friendly confidence he could find.

"I'm not asking you to do it for nothing, Jimmy. Two hundred for the information and two hundred for the loan, that makes four. I'll pay you back five before next week is out."

"Yes? And what if things *did* come unstuck?"

"Why, the one thing has nothing to do with the other. Besides—you said it was a real one you'd have for me."

"You're not such a damned fool as to think that *any* dog can be literally guaranteed. It's ninety per cent certainty, and you know that's the nearest there's ever been."

"Sure, I wouldn't hold it against you if the game didn't work for once in your life. But anyway—they're two different deals. I'll be buying a name from you for two hundred, and borrowing another two hundred for a day or two. And, win or lose, I give you five back before the end of the week. What more do you want?"

"I'm not in the lending business."

"What the heck! Don't you trust me? I'm trusting you about the dog, aren't I? Let's both do it."

Jimmy waited a long time before replying. Lucky was beginning to look at him anxiously. At last Jimmy shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said. "Five hundred before the following Saturday. When do you want the two?"

"Can you dump it in an envelope at the Hill Street post office, to be called for?"

"It'll be there by midday tomorrow."

"Thanks a lot, Jimmy. You know I wouldn't let you down."

They shook hands together, and then we said good-bye to Jimmy and walked out into the street.

Lucky was like someone walking on air. The conversation with Jimmy seemed to have wiped every trace of worry out of his mind. He was just as high up now as he had been low down the night before. And yet, although I wanted him to be that way, I found it hard to join him in it. I left it to him to do all the talking, with me just saying an odd word here and there when his questions made it necessary. The things

that Jimmy and he had said kept going round and round in my head, and a vague kind of worry was clouding everything for me. To him, the plan he had made meant money, meant starting quickly again. That was all it seemed to mean to him. The other side didn't show through, as far as he could see. Perhaps I didn't understand it properly. Perhaps I was imagining things. But I had to know.

"Lucky," I said at last. "What exactly is it that Jimmy is going to do for you?"

"He's loosing off a dog."

"What does he do about it?"

"He just slips in one that is better than the public think. He runs it two or three times when it's off colour. The public mark it down as being no good. That works the odds up, you see. Then, when it's right bang on top of its form, he finds the right race for it, so that it can romp home at a fancy price."

"Do you mean he runs it earlier when it's off colour on purpose?"

"Of course. That's the whole point."

"That isn't straight, is it, Lucky?"

He looked at me, surprised.

"It's all right for me. It's Jimmy who runs the risk of getting found out. That's why he charges so much for the information."

"But, Lucky—that isn't gambling. That isn't the kind of gambling that you usually do. Must you do that, Lucky? Wouldn't it be nicer just to play things the ordinary way? Wouldn't it *feel* nicer?"

He was looking at me coldly, with something in his eyes that I didn't want to see. When he spoke, his voice was like a slap in the face.

"Leave it to me to decide what to do."

I broke away from his eyes, and pressed my lips tight together. I couldn't say any more. There was nothing else to say. Some people, the kind Lucky was—you had to have them as they were, or just not have them at all. You couldn't argue with them. You couldn't start to change them or hold them down. You had to have them as they were.

If you wanted them enough, you didn't mind. Not much. Not very much. I went to bed and cried myself to sleep.

Lucky told me that he wanted me down at the dog track on Tuesday. Nothing could be absolutely certain, and he wanted me there to sway the luck the right way. He wanted me there for something else, too. He explained that the

money had to be put on in a lot of little bets, so that nobody would suspect that a big bet was being put on the dog. And although some of them would know him, they wouldn't know me. So it would be better for me to make the bets.

He got the money from the post office, and gave most of it to me to put in my handbag. He only kept a little himself, just the amount that he reckoned could go on the totalisator without calling attention to itself. He explained exactly what I was to do. At a quarter to seven we strolled along to the corner and bought a paper from the lame boy.

"Any message for the name of Smith?" Lucky asked casually.

"Smith? Sure. I had to give you this."

He pulled an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Lucky, who took it and gave back half a crown in exchange. We walked round the corner, and bought our tickets and went inside the track. Then Lucky tore the envelope open and looked at the folded slip of paper inside.

"Admiralty Arch," he said.

Inside, where the enclosure and the bookies' stands went all round the oval track, the people were solidly thick, all cramming and jostling to get their bets made, and to get the best spot for watching the race from. The cries from the bookmakers, the chatter and the shouts, all mingled together into a confused mass of sound. Music, supplied through loudspeakers to liven up the fifteen-minute periods between races, made no impression on anyone. It might as well not have been playing.

Lucky was holding my arm to prevent me from getting separated from him in the crowd. I was clinging tightly to my precious handbag with the money in it.

"We don't bet until the eight-forty," he said. "There's quite a bit of time yet. We might as well work our way towards the bar and have a drink or two. You watch the racing if you'd rather. Personally I get bored watching dogs run round in circles."

"I'd like a drink," I said.

As we went through the crowd, all sorts of people kept hailing Lucky. He seemed to be quite well known there, although a lot of people who grinned at him did not look the kind of men who would be friends of Lucky's. There was something coarse and brutal about so many of the faces there.

We found a bar, and settled ourselves on a couple of chairs to pass a bit of time. I studied Lucky carefully, but he didn't show any sign of excitement at all. He might have been

having a casual drink on the way to a cinema, instead of being on the brink of a gamble that would either mean success, or debt and ruin. The thought of losing did not seem to enter into his head, and I supposed that the reliability of Jimmy's arrangements made it unnecessary to worry. But as the time went by, and Lucky went from his fourth drink to his fifth, and from his fifth to his sixth, his conversation became less and less, and an atmosphere of tension grew steadily over us. He kept looking at his watch every two or three minutes; and once or twice, as if to check up on his own eyesight, he pulled the folded piece of paper from his pocket and glanced at the name again.

By a quarter past eight, his words and his movements were quick and jumpy.

"Have you got your pencil?"

"Yes. I'm all ready. Don't worry about me."

What I had to do was easy. I had to go to every bookmaker in turn, making a separate bet with each one. Each time, I had to take the ticket, and pencil on the back of it the odds I had been given. I was to start as soon as the previous race was over and the names of the runners in the eight-forty were written up on the bookmakers' boards. That would give me about fifteen minutes, which ought to be plenty of time to get round.

We left the bar and went back to the track. In order to enable me to get to all the bookmakers, Lucky had given me tickets to all the various enclosures, and had shown me the quickest way to dodge round the back of the stands and get from one enclosure to the next. Lucky pointed out a spot at the bottom of some steps, where I was to meet him when I had finished.

"Before the race starts, if possible. But if you're getting behind hand, just go on betting right up till the time they won't take any more, and come back to me as soon as you can afterwards."

He held my arm with his hand for a moment.

"Good luck to us," he said.

"Good luck to us, Lucky," I whispered.

He pushed me forward, and I dived through the people and made for the end bookmaker.

"Admiralty Arch? I'll lay you five to one, lady."

I gave him the money and took the ticket, and quickly scribbled on the back of it. Now the next one. The same again. Now the next, and the next, and the next. The people were beginning to crowd round now, and I had to push hard

to get through quickly. People turned round and told me to keep my elbows to myself, but I didn't care what anybody said. Lucky was depending on me. I had to get round to all of them, and there wasn't any too much time. I finished the first enclosure, and ran round the back of the stands into the next one. The people were thicker now, and I pushed like mad, not worrying how much they shouted and swore at me. Four to one. Three to one. Seven to two, whatever is that? Three and a half to one. The third enclosure, the fourth, the fifth. Now the last one. I was almost fighting my way through by now. The race would be starting at any moment. I couldn't let Lucky down.

I finished the money. Now my bag was stuffed full of cardboard tickets. The race had not started yet. Hugging my bag, I rushed round the back of the stands again to the spot where Lucky was waiting.

"Okay?"

"Yes. I put it all on." I was tired and out of breath.

"What's the average price?"

"It varied from five to one down to three to one. I should think the average would be four."

"Good."

A bell rang. The solid mass of sound from the crowd suddenly crashed into a crazy, screaming din. The race had started.

I couldn't see anything at all from where I was. Lucky jumped up and clung on to the side railings of a stand, so that he could see over the heads of the crowd. The noise was so terrific it made your heart beat faster. I stood there, trembling a little, almost glad that I couldn't see. I suddenly realized just what that race might be doing to Lucky. It couldn't lose. It couldn't lose. There was no need to worry. It would be all right in a minute. It couldn't lose.

The screaming crescendo was suddenly turned down. I thought I heard another name shouted, but I shut my ears, it couldn't be true. It was over now. It was all right now. Thank heaven it was over now.

Lucky was standing beside me again. He was looking down at me. As I looked at his face, I was suddenly frightened of him.

He said, in a voice that I would not have recognized: "You can throw the tickets away. They're no good."

I tried to say something. I didn't know what. Then he spoke to me again.

"Will you see yourself home? I'm going to look for Jimmy."

The crowd closed and hid him immediately, before I had time to speak or think or try to hold him back.

People were pushing me. I was in the way. I let myself go, and the surge of the crowd carried me out into the street.

CHAPTER VII

I HAD WALKED MOST OF THE WAY BACK TO THE FLAT, AND IT was late in the evening by the time I arrived there. By taking a taxi, or even a 'bus, Lucky could easily have overtaken me and reached the flat first; but there was no sign of him. I did not know whether I had expected him to be there or not. I was not sure whether I hoped he would, or hoped he would not. In spite of the long walk through the streets to clear my head, everything in my mind was still cloudy and static. Lucky had gone to look for Jimmy. With a threat in his voice. With a strange, cold hush in his eyes. To look for Jimmy. That didn't mean anything. To look for Jimmy, there was nothing to worry about in that. Jimmy and he were friends. They would do anything for each other. The dog race had not gone the right way, but that was nobody's fault. You could never be absolutely sure about those things. Not absolutely certain. They had both agreed about that.

"Is it a real one?"

"You know I've never handed you the wrong end of anything yet."

It was just bad luck, the hundredth chance, that was all. There was nothing to worry about. To look for Jimmy.

Five hundred back before the end of the week. Two hundred at four to one, eight hundred. And the stake money back, that's a thousand. The tickets aren't any good now. They shouted another name, I knew I heard them. They made such an awful noise. Five hundred before the end of the week.

To look for Jimmy.

The telephone bell was ringing. It couldn't be for me; it would be for Lucky. He isn't in. You can stop ringing, because he isn't at home. He's gone to look for Jimmy. Why shouldn't he? There's nothing wrong in going to look for Jimmy.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Oh—shut up! Some people can't take nothing for an answer.

"Hullo!"

"Good evening. The charming Miss Burns, I believe." It was Flash's voice.

"Lucky's out. I'll tell him you 'phoned."

"But it wasn't Lucky I wanted to talk to. It was you."

"Any message?"

"Now, *please*, Miss Burns. There's something very important I want to talk to you about. It's about Lucky."

The earpiece suddenly squashed itself hard against my ear.

"What about him?"

My pulses were banging with sudden fear as I waited for the answer.

"It's just that I'm worried about what happened the other night. Lucky lost a lot of money, and I don't like a friend of mine to get into a jam."

It was only about the other night. That was all. No excuse for getting jumpy. Nothing to do with tonight. Nothing to do with anybody going to look for Jimmy.

"Lucky and I are old pals, good pals," the telephone was saying. "That little trouble between him and me and the dice the other night was just a misunderstanding. We shall both laugh about it when we see each other next. But in the meantime, if he's in any trouble about money, I'd like to help him."

"Why are you telling me? Why don't you speak to him?"

"Well, you know how it is. A fellow gets annoyed—entirely through a misunderstanding, mind you—and then he doesn't feel like listening to suggestions from the fellow he's annoyed with. So I thought perhaps I could manage to help him, without him even knowing about it. When he finds out later, then he'll realize that I was for him all the time."

"What are you proposing to do?"

"It's a bit difficult to discuss it over the 'phone, Miss Burns. But if you and I could just talk things over for half an hour, I'm sure that between us we could do a lot to help good old Lucky."

No matter how much I disliked hearing that smooth, treacly voice, I couldn't turn it off. If there was any help going for Lucky, just now it didn't matter where it came from.

"You want me to meet you?"

"I wish you would. And I wish you could do it straight away, because I've got a great idea for helping Lucky that wants quick action."

"What do you mean by straight away?"

"Tonight, if you can."

I hesitated, but only for a second. This wasn't any time for missing chances.

"All right. I'll meet you somewhere."

"Splendid. I was hoping you wouldn't refuse me the

chance of helping him. Can you come to Bellet's Café? It's wide awake at this time of the evening. You know where it is? Just round the corner from Frith Street. A taxi will know."

"I'll start now," I said.

"I'll be waiting for you there. Just ask for Mr. Charles."

I put the 'phone slowly back on to the holder, and sat there by it for a minute or two, wondering whether I was doing right or wrong. Lucky would not like me going behind his back like this, but at the same time I did not want to miss any opportunity for helping him. There could be no harm in just hearing what Flash had to say. Perhaps Flash would lend Lucky enough to pay back the debt to Jimmy, and a bit more to tide Lucky over until he could find something that went right for him.

I put my hat and coat on again, and went out of the flat and got into a taxi. In about fifteen minutes it pulled up outside a rather shoddy looking Italian café. I paid it off, and went inside the door. There was a long counter where they sold bottles of wine, and cheese, and different kinds of macaroni. At the end of the counter were two big, shining tea and coffee urns. Through the shop, past the counter, the space was given up to about a dozen small tables, not very clean on top. Several men and a couple of women were sitting at the tables, smoking and drinking coffee. I couldn't see Flash.

I went up to the counter, and spoke to the man behind it.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Charles," I said.

"Oh, yes. He said you would be coming. I'll take you to him."

He came round from behind the counter, and led the way right through to the far end of the café. He pulled aside a curtain and opened a door.

"This way," he said.

I followed him through the door, and then up some stairs. There wasn't any carpet. The place smelt heavy and stale.

He knocked on a door at the top of the stairs. A voice came from inside.

"Yes?"

"A visitor, boss."

Footsteps came across the room, and the door was opened. Flash stood there, in a brightly coloured silk dressing-gown. He wasn't a very nice sight. A piece of plaster ran down his left cheek. His lips were horribly swollen and red. Two of his bottom teeth were missing. I didn't know Lucky had hit him quite so hard.

"Come in, Miss Burns. This is a pleasure." When he smiled, his lower lip sagged and made it worse than ever.

I went into the room, and he closed the door behind me. The room was a surprising contrast to the drab café and the dirty stairway. It was expensively furnished, with a thick carpet, heavy velvet curtains, two large armchairs and a divan, a writing-desk with a telephone on it, and a cocktail cabinet bristling with bottles.

He put a hand on the lapel of my coat.

"Let me take your coat," he said.

"I think I'll keep it on, thanks."

"You may find it rather warm in here. Still . . ." he motioned me towards one of the armchairs, "you can take it off later if you want to, can't you? What will you have to drink?"

"I won't have anything, thanks."

"Now really, Miss Burns, I must insist. I simply can't allow you to come to my office without accepting my humble hospitality. Just a little one, eh? Brandy? I think so."

He poured out two glasses, and handed me one of them. There wasn't any point in annoying him. That wouldn't help. I took the glass. He clinked his against mine.

"To our partnership," he said.

I sipped the brandy. The thing to do was to try to be friendly. That was the way to help Lucky.

Flash sat down in the other armchair, moving it across the carpet so that it was close to mine. Our knees were almost touching.

"It's so nice to see you again," he said. "I've been looking forward to it."

"I thought you wanted to talk about Lucky."

"Oh, yes, of course. Good old Lucky. How is he?"

"He's all right."

"Splendid. A charming fellow."

"What was it you wanted to say about him?"

"I just sort of wondered whether he would like to have an I.O.U. for a thousand pounds returned to him."

He said it with elaborate casualness. I looked at him hard.

"What I.O.U.? Do you mean he owes a thousand pounds?"

"Of course he does."

"Who does he owe it to?" The whole thing seemed to be getting deeper every minute.

Flash heard the worry in my voice, and smiled.

"There's no need for you to worry your pretty little head, my dear. Fortunately, he only owes it to me."

"Since when?"

"A couple of days ago. I bought the I.O.U."

"Bought it?"

"From a man who was playing in the dice game that you were watching the other evening. It appears that after you had left, Lucky was unlucky enough to lose all the cash he had. In the end, one of the men gave Lucky credit for a thousand, and got Lucky's I.O.U. in exchange. Lucky then proceeded to lose the thousand. Most unfortunate."

"But you just said he owed *you* the money."

Flash nodded.

"I just told you—I bought that I.O.U. later on."

"What for?"

"For money."

"What did you want it for?"

Flash got up from his chair, walked over to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself out another drink. When he sat down again, his chair was a little bit closer still.

"What did I want it for? I wanted it for several reasons. In the first place, I don't believe Lucky has got any money now. If that is so, then an I.O.U. of that size is a dangerous thing to have floating about. But it's only dangerous if it is in unfriendly hands. So I took it into my hands, because Lucky and I are pals."

He paused. I had never heard a creepier, oilier voice.

"And the other reasons?" I asked.

"I thought you might have guessed," he said. "The possession of this I.O.U. puts me in the position of being able to do Lucky a really good turn. For instance, I could simply tear it up."

From the way he said it, it was obvious that he was not going to do that with it. I waited for him to go on.

"On the other hand," he continued, "knowing the interest you take in Lucky's well-being, I should feel I was doing *you* a really good turn if I handed it over to you, so that you could have the pleasure of tearing it up. Now, much as I should enjoy doing Lucky a good turn, I should derive even more pleasure from rendering a service to yourself. Forgive me for being so sentimental."

He was leaning forward. Almost accidentally, his hand seemed to fall on my knee. I pushed it away quickly.

"Where is this I.O.U.?" I asked.

"It's quite safe. And if you think it would be still safer in your pretty little hands"—his smile was beginning to make me feel sick—"you've only to say the word."

"What do you mean? What have I got to say?" It was one of those moments when you won't believe things because you just can't bear it.

"You've only got to ask me nicely for it. Joan's your first name, isn't it?"

His leering eyes were going over me. He made things just as plain as if they were printed on a poster.

"I'm going!" I said. My voice was not nearly as loud as I meant it to be. I tried to get up out of the armchair, but he seemed to be in the way.

"You're not going," he was saying. "You're not going to be such a silly little girl. You're going to stay. And as a special reward—if you're specially nice to me—you can tear up that I.O.U. afterwards."

"Is this what you call doing Lucky a good turn? Is this what you call being a friend of his?"

They were flat and foolish words, but I had to say something. He picked up my question savagely.

"It's what I call doing Lucky the right kind of turn that's coming to him."

He had got up out of his chair now. He was standing in front of me, standing over me. The oil had gone from his voice. The hate came suddenly stabbing out of his eyes.

"Do you think I enjoy this kind of thing?" He pointed to the plaster on his face, to his red and swollen lips. "Does Lucky think he can do this to me and get away with it? It's time someone made that cocky slob crawl on his face a bit. That's what is going to start happening now. He's taken enough from other people. Now me and a few other people are going to start taking things from him. We're going to take everything he's got. He's going to pay for this, and this, and this . . ." He broke off to point in turn to every separate inch of his face that Lucky had damaged. "We've taken most of his money. If he's got any left, we'll take that too. We'll take that cosy little flat where he keeps you. We'll take his fancy clothes. We'll leave him with nothing but that damned cocky smile of his. And then"—he fingered the marks on his face again—"we'll put our biggest boots on, and we'll take his smile away."

He stopped talking. He was breathing heavily, and his hands were working. I sat there, in the armchair. I felt I couldn't move.

Suddenly he smiled. He was artificial silk again.

"I almost forgot," he said slowly. "The nicest thing I'm going to take from him is his girl. He won't like that. It

will hurt his pride. But I shall like it. I shall like it very much, my dear."

His eyes went down me, through my clothes. I felt a hot feeling round my waist.

"Please don't think that I should dream of bringing any pressure to bear on you," he went on. "While I am not such a fool as to imagine that you *want* to come to me, I am also wise enough to bear in mind that a lot of your charm would be wasted if you did not do things of your own free will. That is why I am so glad to be able to offer you that I.O.U. as a . . . er . . . as a present afterwards. I am sure that with the thought of that in your mind you will not need any further persuasion. Shall I pour you another drink?"

My eyes were fixed on his. What had started to be fear inside me had changed now to pure cold fury. I stood up quickly from my chair.

"Give me that I.O.U.," I said.

"Don't be in such a hurry, my dear. You'll have that later on."

"Give it to me now, or I'll . . ."

"Or you'll . . . what? I think you're being very foolish, my dear. Just relax."

He put his arm round my shoulder, but I stepped quickly from him.

"Don't touch me, you swine," I said. "You tricked me into coming here, but that's the last time I'll make any mistake about you. I don't believe you've got any I.O.U. from Lucky. You wait till Lucky hears about this."

Flash dived for me and grabbed both my arms.

"Not so fast!" he said. "I've got that I.O.U. all right, and I can play it around in a way that'll have Lucky on the floor for good and all. If you've got any interest in him at all, you'd better be smart and earn it back for him."

His fingers were biting into my arms. I twisted round with all my strength, and broke away from him. Then, without waiting for anything else, I ran to the door and grabbed the handle and pulled it open quickly. Before his hands could reach me again I was on the stairs, going down them as fast as I could.

He didn't come after me. But as I got to the bottom of the stairs his voice came shouting down.

"Tell Lucky to watch out for himself!"

I went through the door with the curtain against it, and ran across the café, past the counter and out into the street. I ran till I came to a taxi rank, when I jumped

into the front one and told the man to take me to the flat.

There was still no sign of Lucky. It was nearly one o'clock. The flat seemed deadly quiet. I sat there, listening for him, wondering where he was, why he didn't come. I had often been alone there in the flat before, at far later hours than this, but tonight the place seemed stiller, lonelier than it had ever seemed before. I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It said ten minutes to one. I checked it with my wrist watch. Yes, that was all it was, ten minutes to one. It was quite early, really. There was no particular reason why he should come back yet. He was often hours and hours later than this. About a quarter to nine, that was when it was. About four hours ago, that was when I left him. Ten, eleven, twelve, one. Four hours. You can't do much in four hours. Time goes so quickly. He might have gone to the pictures. Oh yes! What's wrong with church? They keep them open all night, somewhere. He's got to eat and drink, hasn't he? A man can lose four hours without even noticing it. Any woman who worries about four hours is just a fool of a fuss-pot. You've got plenty to think about for yourself, haven't you? Can't you feel the bruise coming up where that oily swine's fingers dug into your arm? That didn't take long, did it? That didn't take four hours. The dog race seemed to take about four seconds. One, two, three, four. "They aren't any good now. . . . Going to find Jimmy." Four hours ago. That's not so very long. Some people take a lot of finding. They're not always at home. Sometimes they go out with friends. Like Lucky and Jimmy. They're friends. It's just going to be a friendly talk, that's all. Why should anybody worry about a friendly talk? Talking can go on for ages. Four hours is nothing. Some people go on talking for hours and hours. Other people only say a few words, like "going to find Jimmy". That doesn't take four hours. So what? A girl who starts checking up on a man might as well say good-bye. They're his four hours, aren't they? He's never home as early as this. Never. There is no point in expecting him for hours yet. The best thing to do is to go to bed, instead of waiting up. It will be warmer in bed. It isn't cold, and yet it seems chilly in here. Quiet and chilly. It'll be cosier with the other bar of the electric fire on.

Take hold of yourself, for heaven's sake. You don't usually jump like that when the telephone rings.

"Hullo?"

It wasn't Lucky's voice at the other end. I didn't know whose it was.

It said: "Put Lucky on the 'phone."

"Lucky isn't here," I answered.

"Put him on the 'phone!" The voice said it again, impatiently.

"He isn't here."

"Listen, little girl. We know all about love and kisses, but this is the moment to drop them before they burn your fingers. Stop covering Lucky, and tell him we want to talk to him, now!"

"He isn't here, I tell you. Who's speaking?"

There was a pause. I could vaguely hear the sound of voices talking together at the other end of the 'phone. Then the same voice came back at me.

"Were you at the track with him tonight?"

I hesitated. "Yes, but . . ."

"That's all right. Now we're just giving you a final opportunity to stop playing for the wrong side. If Lucky isn't there, where is he?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since."

"Since what?"

"Since I left him. I left him hours ago."

"Where?"

"At the dog track."

"Was that before or after he'd been throwing his weight about?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'll tell you what I mean. Lucky's been using those quick-tempered hands of his once too often. He's bashed up Jimmy till only his best friends could bear to look at him. But we happen to be his best friends. And so we want to know, where's Lucky? And you're going to tell us."

"I don't know where he is." My words were just a wobbly whisper. The voice at the other end was snapping back at me.

"Listen, little girl. We've got no time to argue with you now. But if you choose to stand in the way of trouble, don't grumble if you get your share. One last chance, now. Where's Lucky?"

The 'phone had become a cold, horrible thing in my hand. I'd got nothing to say to it. I wanted to break it in half and fling it away. I moved it, slowly, inch by inch away from my ear. Just before I put it down, I heard the click of it being rung off at the other end.

I stood in the middle of the room, listening; I didn't know what for, just listening. Somewhere, away across London

perhaps, there was something I wanted to hear, if only my ears could reach.

The sudden quick sickness of fear was in my stomach. My legs were trembling as I stood there, and to steady them. I started to pace up and down the room. I lighted a cigarette, squashed it out again, lighted another. The silence of the room was getting more than I could stand. I went across to the cocktail cabinet, and poured myself out some brandy. I stood by the fire, cold and hazy, as the brandy trickled hotly down my throat. And then I saw them, my cigarette and glass, in the same hand. As they fell into the hearth, the tinkle of the breaking glass seemed to echo and re-echo through the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE ARE THINGS THEY DO TO A MAN, AND THINGS THEY DO to a woman. His came first. I can see it, feel it, live through it in my sleep, just as if it had been me.

In the stinking darkness of a Soho street they shot him in the back. Nobody heard the dull *flup* of the silenced gun. Somewhere back behind the railings, in the black shadows of the churchyard, a crouching figure had seen its target crumple down on to the pavement, and that was enough.

But he wasn't down for long. Only for a few seconds. He was up again now. Yes, straining and with his teeth tight together, leaning his bottom against the low wall, gripping the iron railings that started where the wall left off, he was up again now.

He fought to keep on his feet, as the scorching pain went through his back and up into his shoulders. His legs did not hurt, but there just wasn't anything in them any more. They felt dull and soft, and they wanted to bend up and slop him down on the pavement again. But his teeth were tight together, and his hand had got hold of the railing, and he stayed on his feet.

"Are you all right? I saw you fall down. Did you hurt yourself?"

A sweat had come out on his face, and his eyes were fierce with pain. But the look that he gave to the passer-by did not ask for help or pity. It just sent him walking on down the street a bit faster than before.

From around the corner at the end of the street, slowly and close to the kerb, came a taxi. Gripping the railings, he watched it come nearer. He tried to shout for it, but his

teeth didn't want to come apart, and the shout wouldn't come. Holding himself up with one hand, he managed to raise the other in a signal. As the taxi drew level, the driver's searching eye saw him just in time.

The cab drew up by the kerb. Lucky let his raised arm fall to his side, but he didn't make any more move.

The driver leant across. "Cab, sir?" he checked up.

A nod with the head. Now, quietly, just loud enough to be heard, he managed to speak.

"Open the door."

Cab drivers are used to drunks. A hand came across, felt backwards for the handle, and the door swung open.

There it was. Three or four yards from the railings, that was all. Three or four yards, with nothing to hold on to. Three or four gaping, swaying yards. His hands gripped tighter on the railings, and the sweat trickled down his face. The pain was shooting through his shoulders, and his belly felt full of sick. Three or four yards, with no damned legs to do it with.

Three yards, not more than three to the door that was sticking out from the cab at right-angles. He gripped himself together. Still holding the railings, he slid himself down a bit, and worked his feet away from the base of the wall. Then he twisted sideways, holding on to the railings with one hand. He measured it out, fixed his eyes on to the door, and shoved.

His legs just held him, as he swung over like a pendulum the wrong way up. Reaching his other arm out, he managed to grab the door and stop himself from going down. Then, with a sudden lurching effort, he was on the floor of the taxi.

"Where to?" The driver's voice was matter-of-fact. They were often like this, drunks were. If they could get in by themselves, they were worth the fare. If they needed help, it was better to miss them out.

"Twenty-five, Merton Place."

The driver's arm came reaching round, the door was slammed and the taxi moved off. By the time it had turned the first corner, the muddled-up body on the floor in the back was practically unconscious.

Left, right, right again, across Piccadilly Circus and then up past Hyde Park Corner. The traffic was quite clear now, and the journey took less than fifteen minutes. The taxi turned into the Place and pulled up at the door marked twenty-five. It stood there, the driver sitting in his seat, waiting. But nothing happened. After half a minute or so,

the driver's hand came feeling round for the handle again, and the door swung open. Still no sound or movement came from inside. The driver shrugged his shoulders, muttered to himself, switched off his engine and climbed down from his seat resignedly.

"'Ere y'are, sir. Want a 'and, do yer? Oh, blast yer!"

He saw the untidy mess of body and arms and legs on the floor, and had visions of having to clean up spew before he could take another fare. Lucky, weak and fainting, tried to speak, but nothing came. The driver put his hands down roughly, one on Lucky's arm and the other on his shoulder. But there wasn't any reaction. All he felt was just a flopping weight.

"Flat out, blast 'im!" the driver muttered. And then, as he let go and drew his hands back, he caught sight of the one that had been behind the shoulder.

"Gawd! Blood!"

The driver stood stiff, staring into the cab, scared and uncertain. Then he looked up and down the square. It was quiet, empty, nobody at all. His head went round and round. The police. That was it. Go for the police. In the cab? No, leave the cab. Go for the police and fetch them back to see for themselves. Leave the cab. Shut the door? Yes, better shut the door. And then run for the nearest copper and . . .

The door wouldn't shut. Somehow or other a leg was in the way. It hadn't been in the way before. It must have moved. But it wasn't moving now. It couldn't have moved, it looked all floppy and finished. But the door wouldn't shut.

The driver, sweating himself by now, looked up and down the square again, but nobody came. He hovered on the choice, and chose the nearest thing. Running up to the door of twenty-five, he put his finger on the bell and started ringing furiously.

I was down the stairs in a couple of seconds. I opened the door, and there was the driver. The words tumbled out of him.

"Chap gave me this address. Thought 'e was drunk. Bring 'im 'ere, and when I open the door outside 'ere, there 'e is, dead. And bleedin'."

I looked past him, over the pavement to the cab. Then, without saying a word, I pushed him aside and moved quickly across. I leaned forward into the cab, kneeling on the running-board. I put my arms inside and found his head and turned it towards me.

"Lucky," I whispered.

For a moment or two I went on looking at his face in the semi-darkness. But nothing came back from him. Then I turned my head to find the driver.

"Give me a hand with him," I said.

The cabby edged forward.

"Dead, ain't 'e?"

"Don't be a fool! Of course he isn't! He's only fainted."

"But the blood, miss . . ."

"Shut up talking, and do what I tell you. We go through the door and straight up the stairs. There is only one flight. You take his legs, I'll take his head. Quickly!"

I climbed into the cab and got my hands underneath his armpits.

"Don't stand there like a half-wit," I snapped. "Take his legs."

The driver came forward and fumbled hold of the legs. Together we eased him out.

"I'll go first, backwards," I said. "As you come through the street door, kick it shut."

We carried him across the pavement, and I backed through the doorway and up the stairs, feeling the way with my heels. When my feet reached the third stair I stopped.

"I told you to kick the door shut as you came through. Do you think we're putting on a public entertainment?"

The cabby, so bewildered that he hardly knew what was happening, felt with his foot and found the door and pushed it shut. Then, together we struggled to the top of the stairs, and into Lucky's bedroom.

"On the bed there," I said.

We laid him on the bed. I bent down quickly, undid his waistcoat and put my ear on to his shirt. Then I stood up, walked to the door, and pointed to my bedroom.

"Wait in there," I said to the cabby.

"But . . ."

"Wait in there," I said firmly. I didn't give him any chance to argue. As he went in, I shut the door on him. Then I went quickly across the passage into the living-room. I picked up the telephone and dialled Doc's number. It rang for a sickening long time, but he answered at last.

"It's Joan Burns. Please come over to Lucky's flat at once. There's been an accident. It's very urgent. Don't wait a minute, come as quickly as you can."

I put the telephone down and went back into his bedroom. I closed the door quietly behind me, and then went on tip-toe across the room to the bed where he was lying. I stood for

a moment, looking down at him, softly and anxiously. The blood was staining the bedspread, but it was not coming fast now. As I stood there, staring down at him, I was strangely unafraid. He would be all right. There was blood, yes, but that was nothing to worry about. Not necessarily. Not always. He would be all right. Lucky would be all right. I knew. In the way that you just simply know things, I knew.

I stared at his face, at his eyes. The lids were tight down over them now. Whatever happened, they wouldn't blaze at me now. That tearing fire that came out of his eyes was shut off now, like when he was asleep. I lifted my arm, and held it out towards him, my hand just an inch or two off his face. Like when he was asleep. To touch him then was just to start that scorching look all over again. But now it was more than sleeping. Now you could touch him, and the eyes wouldn't open and burn. Now, as he lay there unconscious, you could touch him and it was safe. You could touch him lightly, softly, smoothly, the way you wanted to, the way you dreamed about. You could lay your hand on his forehead, and push your fingers lightly through his hair. You could put your mouth down to him. You could let your breath play quietly on his cheek. You could nuzzle your nose against him. You could part your lips, and let them dance across his face. Not kissing, but just lightly skimming over him, the way you wanted to, the way you always dreamed about.

Suddenly he stirred. His body twisted, and his head flopped over to the other side. I had known that he wouldn't be like that for long. Quiet and still, so that you could touch him softly, he wouldn't be like that for long.

Without waiting for his eyes to open, I went quickly to the door, and along to the room where I had put the taxi driver. He was standing in the middle of the floor, trying to twist his cap to pieces in his hands.

"You must excuse me. I couldn't help keeping you waiting for a few minutes."

He gaped at me. I suppose I ought to have been agitated, crying, hysterical. But I just didn't feel that way. I spoke calmly, almost casually, as if nothing unusual had happened.

"What about the police, miss? 'Ave you 'phoned 'em?"

I knew my cue here right enough. I knew what Lucky would want me to do. I stared at him blankly, as if he had asked me some kind of a riddle.

"The police?" I asked. "But why should I want to do that?"

"But . . ." The cabby struggled for his words. This was

all wrong. Here was a sensation, a real newspaper-headline sensation, and nobody had any business to be calm and collected about it.

"Ain't 'e dead?"

I wrinkled my forehead, as if he had asked me some quite incomprehensible question.

"Dead? Who? The gentleman you helped in here?" I frowned, as if slightly annoyed at an impertinent suggestion. "What extraordinary ideas you do get into your head! I can assure you that he is just as alive as you are. It was just one of his attacks. He has them every now and then, you know. He'll be as right as rain in half an hour."

The driver shifted about on his feet a bit, and then suddenly looked at me with a challenge.

"What d'yer mean? What y're gettin' at?" The suspicion in his eyes got firmer, as he leaned slightly forward and said in a whisper: "What about the blood?"

I smiled at him gently. I turned to a drawer in my dressing-table, and quickly took something out of my handbag. Then I said: "I don't think there was any blood. I think you were imagining that. Weren't you?"

It crackled in my hand as I spoke. My eyes were fixed on his, and my friendliest smile was playing round my mouth.

"Weren't you?" I insisted.

He looked at me, bewildered. But my hand was out towards him, and he lowered his head and saw.

"What's that for?"

"It's just for helping me. Thank you very much."

He scratched his hair.

"A fiver?"

"Five pounds, yes." It hurt to let the money go, but I kept my smile there.

He couldn't stop his hand. It came out and took the money.

"But, miss . . ."

I put a hand lightly on his elbow, and led him towards the door.

"He was just taken queer. It was nothing. We're used to it. Understand?"

He looked at the note in his hand. Then he nodded with a knowing wink.

"You bet, miss! Thanks very much, miss!"

I followed him down the stairs, watched him go out through the door, and closed it after him. I stood waiting just inside it, listening until I heard the taxi start up and move away. Then I ran back up the stairs and into Lucky's room.

His eyes were open now, watching the door, waiting for it to open. As I went in, he jerked his question at me.

"How did I get here?"

I went across and bunched up the pillow under his head.

"I'm all right. Don't mess me about. How did I get here?"

"You came in a cab. You were passed out. You're bleeding from the back. The cabby and I carried you up."

"Where's the cabby now?"

"Just gone. I gave him a fiver and talked him out of it. I think he'll be all right."

"Wise girl. We don't want people sniffing round. Some swine plugged me in the back. You'd better 'phone Doc, and get him to come over quick."

"I've 'phoned him. He's on his way. He should be here any minute."

He forced himself to smile.

"That's what I call service. Thanks. It's a good job you were around."

The doorbell rang. "That'll be the doctor now," I said.

I went out of the room and ran downstairs to open the door. There on the doorstep was Doc, with his pouchy face and his bloodshot eyes. His felt hat was tipped backwards off his face, and in his mouth there was a big cigar that had gone out.

With the kind of gesture a man would normally make to raise his hat, he removed the cigar ostentatiously from his mouth. Then he gave me his ragged, yellow grin.

"Well, little lady? And what's all the excitement about? I didn't really hear what you were talking about on the 'phone. You spoke too quickly—I couldn't keep up."

I looked at him coldly and hard.

"Are you sober?"

His whole face and figure seemed to wreath itself into a look of outraged dignity.

"What a question! Have you ever known your old friend Doc to be under the influence of intoxicating liquor?"

"Be yourself, you'll need it. Haven't you brought your bag?"

"It's in the car here."

"Fetch it, and bring it in. And jump to it. He's pretty bad."

He went across the pavement to the car, and came back with a bag in his hand.

"What are the orders tonight, madam?" He hiccupped. "Am I to patch someone up—or just make sure that someone doesn't recover?"

I put out my hand and grasped his arm, pinching through his coat as hard as I could. My eyes got hold of his.

"Pull yourself up! I told you on the 'phone—it's Lucky."

As I brought the name out, he suddenly stiffened and came rocketting back to life.

"Hell! I didn't hear you!"

The words came back over his shoulder, as he went up the stairs two at a time. He knew the flat, and went straight to Lucky's bedroom. By the time I got there, almost on his heels, his coat and jacket were off and he was rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"It's nothing much, Doc." Lucky was fully awake now. "Somebody plugged me and nearly missed, that's all."

"Who did it, Lucky?"

"I'll ask the questions. You do the fixing up. And do it quick. It isn't very comfy."

Doc motioned to me.

"Give me a hand to get his things off."

I went round to the other side of the bed, and together we eased the jacket off, and rolled him over on to his face. Doc slit the shirt open at the back. I turned away.

"Is it bleeding much?" The voice was muffled by the pillow.

"No. It's practically stopped. But I must wash it off before I can see properly." He turned to me. "Can you get me a bowl of water?"

I ran through to the kitchenette, and came back with a bowl of water. He put some drops of disinfectant into it, and sponged the back of the shoulders. I forced myself to watch. There, clear enough, was the mark where the bullet had entered.

"Brace yourself," said Doc. "I'm probably going to hurt you."

"Go ahead."

The doctor's fingers moved lightly over the back of the shoulders. They hovered round the bullet mark. There was a deep frown on his face.

"I want you to tell me when you feel a sudden extra pain."

"That's asking! My whole back is hurting all the time!"

The fingers pressed harder.

"There?"

"Not specially. Not more than anywhere else."

The hands came away. The doctor's teeth played thoughtfully with his lower lip, as he looked at the mark and wondered.

"Didn't cough up any blood before I came, did you?"

"No. What's happened? Let's have it!"

"Just a minute." The fingers were exploring again, further away from the mark. The whole body suddenly jerked.

"No!" It came in a tense, muffled whisper from the pillow. The doctor took his hands away again.

"I must get you to a hospital, Lucky."

Lucky turned his face out of the pillow so as to speak more easily.

"What for? What's the damage?"

"Extracting the bullet is going to need an anæsthetic. And then we'll have to take an X-ray to see what it's done to the vertebra. The bullet must have been nearly spent. Probably fired with a weak charge. But you'd have been dead now if it hadn't shaved off sideways. It's changed its direction, and gone along under the skin, nearly four inches."

There was silence for several seconds. When Lucky spoke, his voice was steady.

"I'll keep out of hospital, thank you. You can take it out here."

"But I can't, Lucky. You'd be much better off in a hospital."

"Stop talking, Doc. You know about hospitals. You go in with a bullet in you, and that's just the start of things. It's reported. And then the questions start to break. If it isn't you, it's the fellow that plugged you. Now, I don't know who put this one in me. But if anyone gets the swine, it's got to be me. Not the police. If they start a round-up, plastering me with questions when I'm half doped—well, you know just how healthy the town's going to be for me afterwards. And besides—I don't particularly want to be checked up on. You know that. So hospitals are out. Get on with your job!"

The doctor had listened to the speech with the worry growing on his face. He answered quickly and anxiously.

"But you don't understand, Lucky. There might easily be complications. The vertebra might collapse. I couldn't tell without seeing."

"There won't be any complications. That would be bad luck. I've got a feeling that I'm not going to have any more of that. The bullet glanced off, didn't it? Can you think of any better good-luck sign than that? My luck's in now. It's just come back. I'll play it."

The doctor wiped his hand across his forehead.

"But I couldn't even take the bullet out without an anæsthetic. You couldn't stand it. It would be too tough without an anæsthetic."

"Don't start telling me what I can stand. Get on with your job. That's what I keep you for, isn't it? What do you think you're kept sitting so pretty for? To help me into hospitals? You're going to take that plug out now. *Now!*"

The doctor hesitated. Then he stood up and shrugged his shoulders. There wasn't any answer that he knew.

"All right, Lucky. If you want it."

He started taking things out of his bag, and laying them out on a small table.

"I shall want some more dressings. The girl could get them from the all-night chemist on the corner."

"Send her."

He scribbled a list of the things he wanted. I went out into the street and hurried along to the all-night chemist's shop. They gave me a parcel, and I grabbed it and ran back to the flat with it. The doctor was in the kitchenette, with a saucepan of water on the gas stove. When it boiled, he fetched some instruments and put them in the water. Then he carried them back in a clean towel to the bedroom. I stood by, waiting to be told what to do. The doctor pointed to something on the table.

"Pass that when I ask you," was all he said to me. Then he stood looking down at Lucky for a moment.

"I'm going to start now," he said.

"Okay."

"It's going to be tough. I won't be able to help it."

"Go ahead."

The face that was pressed against the pillow became wet with sweat. The edge of the jaw-bone showed white through the skin, as if the teeth were nearly crushing each other. The hands took hold of the bedclothes and gripped them, tighter, tighter. But the only sound in the room was the click of instruments on the side of the bowl, and the heavy breathing of the doctor.

CHAPTER IX

DOC CAME OUT OF THE BATHROOM, DRYING HIS HANDS ON A towel, and walked into the lounge. He tossed the towel on to the back of a chair, and went to the cabinet and poured himself out half a tumbler of whisky. I pushed the door to, and stood there in the middle of the room, waiting for him to say something. He didn't speak. He took a gulp of the neat whisky, passed the back of a hand wearily across his forehead, and then flopped himself down into one of the

armchairs, the tumbler still in his hand. I looked for some sort of a sign in his face, but there wasn't anything there. I shivered a little. When the taxi-driver had come ringing at the door, a sudden cold calm had stilled me inside. It had helped me to carry Lucky up the stairs. It had helped me to deal with the taxi-driver. It had helped me all the time till now. Now, suddenly, it was different. Things were crowding my mind, impatient for having been kept out of it.

Doc was sprawling, motionless, in the armchair, his mouth sagging open. My voice seemed to crash like a breaking plate on the silence of the room.

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Eh?" Doc had been either miles away or nearly asleep.

"How bad is he?"

The doctor took another tired swallow from his glass.

"He's all right," he said. "He's got the constitution all right. He'll be walking about quite normal in a week."

"What was that you said about complications?"

He shook his head.

"There won't be any. Why should there? I was only telling him that to try and get him to go to hospital. I didn't want to take the bullet out here." He paused, and looked at me for a minute. Then he said: "By Golly, he's tough!"

It was funny how nice it was to hear him say that.

I said: "You've given him something, haven't you?"

He nodded. "Something that will make him sleep till morning. I'll come and see him, change the dressing. You go to bed. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"You're *sure* it's all right? Not really serious?"

"No. It was a near squeak, but there's absolutely nothing to worry about."

I watched him finish his drink, and go and pour himself some more. As he turned to come back to his chair, I stood and faced him.

"You *are* a doctor, aren't you?"

The glass jerked in his hand. His eyes woke up.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed.

"You're not in practice, are you?"

His pouchy face folded into a scowl.

"What do you think you're saying? I've put in plenty of practice tonight, haven't I? Do you think I could have done that if I wasn't a doctor? Don't talk silly!"

"What did you mean by that remark you made when you arrived at the flat tonight?"

"What remark?"

"You said something about 'were you required to stop somebody from recovering?'"

"Me? I didn't say anything like that. You're imagining things, young lady."

"You were practically drunk when you came to the door."

"Drunk? Could I have done that on Lucky if I'd been drunk?"

"You sobered up quickly, I know, but you weren't properly sober when you arrived."

"What is this? A cross-examination?"

"Why does Lucky pay you money? What did he mean when he said he kept you sitting pretty?"

"He was joking. Lucky's always making jokes. Don't you know?"

"Why didn't you take him to hospital if you thought it was better? Do you always let your patients choose? Do you always take orders from them?"

"Lucky's a friend of mine. We're old friends, Lucky and I. Naturally you want to do things so as to please your friends, don't you?"

"Even when it means risking someone's life?"

"Who's talking about risking anyone's life? He's all right, isn't he? You're making a lot of fuss about a little scratch."

"You didn't think it was a little scratch. You wanted to send him to hospital."

"Well? He didn't want to go, did he? You heard."

"Why didn't he want to go?"

"How should I know?"

"What did Lucky mean when he said he didn't want to be checked up on?"

"I didn't hear him say that."

"Yes, you did. You must have understood what he meant. You stopped arguing when he said that."

"Why ask me what Lucky meant? Why don't you ask him?"

He lifted his glass and drained it, then thumped it back on to the cabinet. He walked out into the passage, and picked up his coat and hat from the floor where he had dropped them. Just before he went down to the front door, he put his head back into the room and said: "If Lucky doesn't soon tell you to keep your mouth shut, somebody else will!"

I was sitting by Lucky's bed when he woke up. His eyes went gradually round the room, slowly coming back to it. Just as he saw me, he moved his body slightly, and his face

was momentarily tightened with pain. But he forced it away, and smiled quickly.

"Good morning. How's nurse?"

His voice was his own again. Something danced inside me.

"How's the patient?" I asked.

"Couldn't be better. Did Doc get it out all right? I think I passed out just too soon."

"He got it out all right, Lucky."

"Good for Doc!"

"He'll be coming soon to dress the wound."

"It's nothing really. I just feel a bit stiff, that's all."

"Have you any idea who did it?"

I watched his eyes go gradually dark. He spoke very softly, not to me.

"I've got two or three ideas," he said. "And the first thing I'm going to do, as soon as I'm fit, is to sort those ideas out."

"Lucky," I pleaded, "don't . . . don't get yourself mixed up in any more trouble."

He didn't hear. He looked straight ahead at the wall in front of him.

"I'll find the man who did it, and I'll find the man who told him to."

The search had started. Right there in that room at that minute, the search had started. His mind was stretching out across the streets, probing about into heaven knew what dark and twisted alleyways. I moved more in front of him, getting in the way of his eyes, trying to pull him back into the room.

"Don't get like that, Lucky. Please don't get like that. You'll make yourself worse if you get like that."

He turned to me.

"They can't do things like that to me, Jo. They just can't do it. There's something inside that says they just can't. I'd rather die than let them get away with it."

"Don't think about it now, Lucky. The first thing you've got to do is to get well again, isn't it? That's all you want to think about now. You've lost quite a bit of blood, you know. We'll have to feed you up, and if you're *very* good perhaps we'll even let you go away for a holiday."

He suddenly turned his attention on me.

"The biggest question of all," he said slowly, "is why are you still here, Jo. Why the devil *are* you here? You saw me go down once, and you hung on while I took another chance. Now you've seen that chance go too. There's no profit left in this partnership now, Jo. Don't think I'm blaming you in any way. It's not your fault, it's mine. But I just can't offer you anything

any longer. The only thing I can give you now is advice. And that advice is to get out before you get caught up in a muddle."

His voice was gentle and earnest. I hesitated before answering. Then I said: "Do you want me to go, Lucky?"

He avoided my eyes.

"That's really nothing to do with it," he said. "I'm advising you to go, because there's nothing left here that is going to be any good to you."

"Who is going to get you better if I go now?" I asked.

He still looked away. "Doc will see to that," he said. "I'll be all right in Doc's hands. I'm not that bad. It's only a little scratch on the back."

I smiled. "Do you mind if I just stay till the little scratch is better? Then I promise I'll let you bundle me off whenever you like."

He looked at me now, and smiled.

"You're the most persistent and obstinate lucky charm I've ever had," he said. "But until I am in a position to use my lucky charm again, what do you suppose we are going to use for money?"

"I've still got ten pounds in my purse," I said helpfully.

"Ten pounds will soon go. Can you control your blushes?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, would it embarrass you frightfully to go and borrow some on my behalf?"

"Who from?"

"A couple of good friends of mine. They'd each of them lend me twenty-five or fifty pounds without turning a hair. If you wouldn't mind going to them with a message from me, it would help a lot."

"Of course I'll go," I said. "Who are they?"

"One is Bertie Williams. He's manager of the Granada Palace Hotel. The other is Arthur Patterson, one of the biggest bookies down at the Westland Road dog track. They'll both do it like a shot. Just tell them I'm ill, and can't get around to unlock my money."

I scribbled the names down on a piece of paper. Just as I had done so, the door-bell rang.

"That'll be the doctor," I said.

I went down the stairs, and opened the door to him. He brushed rudely past me, and strode into Lucky's room.

"How are you feeling? Did you sleep all right?"

"Fine, thanks."

I had come into the room just behind him. He jerked his thumb at me and spoke to Lucky.

"She was asking me too many questions last night. You'd better tell her to keep her trap shut—or I'll shut it for her!"

For a moment, Lucky gaped at him as if he couldn't believe what he had heard. Then his face hardened. Lying there, on the bed, wounded, I wouldn't have believed a man could wield such force across a room. The look from his eyes seemed to come across and push Doc backwards. His voice was quite soft, a little husky. It carried the threat of absolutely anything.

"Take your tongue off her and keep it off," was all he said.

Doc's face changed. The guts went out of it. He looked at me. Then back at Lucky.

"Sorry, Lucky. Okay."

As I walked out of the room, I got his ragged yellow grin again.

The entrance lounge of the Granada Palace was jostling with people as I walked in through the revolving door. Some were chattering in groups; others were making their way purposefully from the entrance door to the restaurant, from the bar to the cloakroom, from the reception desk to the lifts; others stood about conspicuously, waiting for their appointments to turn up to lunch. As I mingled in with them, I felt awkwardly conscious of the difference between my errand and theirs. In a place of that size, to ask for the manager was to cause a mild sensation. I had come straight along, soon after Lucky had asked me, without thinking it out at all. Now, I suddenly realized what a hopelessly unsuitable time of day I had chosen. I hesitated in the middle of the floor, half inclined to go out and come back again when the midday rush hour was over. But I didn't want to waste any time, because I was eager to get back to Lucky and take at least one worry off his mind. So I went across to the reception desk, and asked if I could speak to Mr. Williams.

"He's rather busy just now," said the girl, in a tone of practised apology. "Can I do anything?"

"I rather wanted to see him," I said.

"Can you tell me what it is about?"

"It's a purely personal matter."

"What name is it?"

"Miss Burns," I told her. By the time I had realized that my name wouldn't mean anything to him, the girl had swung round and disappeared through a little door behind her. She came out again after a minute or two.

"Do you mind waiting a few moments?"

"Not at all."

I stood there by the counter. After a few minutes I was conscious of someone standing beside me. I turned.

"You wished to see me, madam?"

In his black coat and striped trousers, he was what you would expect. I quickly told him who I was and where I had come from.

"He wants to ask you a little favour," I said, trying to make it sound as if I were not going to ask for very much. He didn't give me a chance to get any further.

"I don't know what it is he wants, but he knows perfectly well that I haven't time for friendly chats while I'm here." The suave hotel-manager note had dropped right out of his voice. It struck me that he didn't seem nearly as friendly as Lucky had led me to expect.

"I . . . I'm sorry . . ." I started, but he cut in on me. He must have changed his mind quickly.

"Will you go into the restaurant, and tell them that I said you were to be given lunch? Take a bit of time over it, and come back and ask for me here again at about half-past two."

He bowed almost imperceptibly, and walked away from me. The sensible thing appeared to be to do what he said. I went through to the restaurant, and when I had given his name to the head-waiter, I had lunch, with the waiters giving me more attention than I had ever had anywhere before. I killed time over my coffee until it was half-past two. Then I went back to the entrance hall, and over again to the reception desk. The same girl was there. She didn't wait for me to speak.

"You want to see Mr. Williams, don't you? Would you come round and through this door, please?"

She motioned me round to a door at the end of the counter, and opened it for me. I went in, and there was Mr. Williams sitting at a desk. He stood up, and waved his hand towards a big leather armchair. I sat down. He spoke before I had the chance.

"What does Lucky want now?" he asked.

"Well . . . he just wanted to . . ." I smiled, did a little laugh, just to ease the tension of the room. "He wondered if you wouldn't mind lending him a little money, just for a week or two."

He was looking at me closely, suspiciously.

"Where do you come into this? Why doesn't he come himself? What's he trying to cover up?"

"He's ill," I said. "Nothing very much. Just laid up for a week or so. He told me to explain that was why he wanted

to borrow some—simply because he can't get around to lay his hands on his own money."

"So he's ill, is he?" The completely disinterested tone of voice was more effective than a sneer.

"He's in bed," I said. "He'll soon be all right again, but just at the moment it's a bit awkward for him. He said he was sure you wouldn't mind."

Mr. Williams appeared to be considering the point. I was expecting his next remark to be a question as to how much Lucky wanted to borrow. But he didn't trouble to ask that.

"It's funny of Lucky to use a cover," he said thoughtfully. "It's not like him. Does this mean he's trying to pull something extra heavy?"

"I don't know what you mean about using a cover," I said. "I told you—he's ill. That's why he sent me."

Mr. Williams tapped his knuckles on the desk impatiently.

"All right. All right. Let's leave that bit out. Do you think I care if he's ill or well? What I want to know is this. What did he tell you to say to me if I refused to spring any money?"

I looked at him, puzzled. He didn't sound like the good friend Lucky had said he was.

"He didn't tell me to say anything," I said. "He just . . . he just told me to ask you."

For a full minute he was searching my face carefully. I tried to look natural, but I was so perplexed that I couldn't help looking confused. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet, but I thought there was nervousness in it.

"Give Lucky a message from me. Tell him there's no money as far as I am concerned. And tell him that if he turns his mind over once or twice, he'll remember that I've got just as much on him as he's got on me. If his mouth opens, so does mine. Wide."

I sat there, looking at him, letting his words sink in, letting them gradually make sense. I turned them over and shook them up, but they couldn't mean anything else. I felt myself rapidly growing hot, and I knew my face was scarlet. I stood up from the chair. I felt awkward and clumsy. I wanted some words that would crush him and hurt him, but they wouldn't come. I wanted to run at him and hit his face. I wanted to cry.

I opened my mouth. It shut again. All I wanted to do now was to get out of the room, away from him. I was nearly at the door when his voice stopped me.

"Listen, kid. Don't fool yourself. If Lucky's got you digging for him, break away. He'll give you a dirty spade."

The sudden kindness in his voice was worse than anything before. I stood there, a horrible, shameful moment, with things all wrong in my head.

He went on: "Anyway, the town's all plastered with Lucky's paper money. You won't do any easy borrowing now."

I went through the door, and closed it behind me, and walked across the entrance lounge hardly seeing the people there. It wasn't cold outside, but the fresh air seemed to hit me like a snowball. I followed the street along, bumping into everybody, fuddling my way. And gradually I fought it back, gradually I shook the horrid thinking out of my head. Lucky's paper money. That was all it was. That was why he wouldn't lend him anything. That was the only reason. The other was just a bit of silly clever talk. Lucky's paper money. That was why. Williams knew about the I.O.U. that Flash had. He'd seen it, somehow or other. That was why he wouldn't lend. He'd seen the I.O.U. He didn't think Lucky could pay. It would be just like Flash to show that I.O.U. around and make things awkward.

I had to get Lucky some money. I couldn't let him down on the first thing he asked me to do.

I stopped in the street and looked around, and brought things back into focus. From out of my handbag I took the slip of paper that I had scribbled the names on. The Westland Road dog track. I went to the nearest newspaper boy and bought a midday paper. The middle part was all about dogs. There was an afternoon meeting at Westland Road at half past three. I asked the newspaper boy where the place was. He said I could get a 'bus all the way.

"'Bout an eightpenny ride, lady. If you're going there I'll mark your card."

I shook my head, and crossed the road and waited by the bus stop. When it came, it was full up with shopping women and shoddy-looking business men, and I had to stand for the first part of the way. It gradually emptied, until there were only a handful of people left in it; and then, as it got towards the track, it filled again with an entirely different set of people. When we reached the stadium, they all poured out of the bus and crammed through the turnstiles. I let the crowd carry me with it, until I was standing again in all that confused din of shouted excitement. Until that moment, it had never occurred to me what an essential thing privacy is when you're trying to borrow money. You can't be casual about anything if you're having to shout to make yourself heard.

I wandered along the line of bookmakers, looking at the names written up on the stands. There it was, in big red letters on chromium. "Arthur Patterson—Civility and a quick Pay Out." There were two men by the stand. One was taking the money, handing out the tickets, and shouting all the time. The other was writing things down in an enormous flat book. I went up and spoke to the one who was taking the money.

"Are you Mr. Patterson?"

"That's the name, lady. Which one do you want?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something." As I said it, somebody edged me aside so that he could make a bet. Then somebody else came barging in front of me to do the same. It was hopeless. I waited till there was a lull in business for a brief moment, and said: "Can I see you after the racing is over?"

His hand went round the back of his neck, and he pushed his bowler hat forward over his head. He opened his eyes wide and gave me an enormous grin. He was pleasant in a vulgar way.

"I'll say you can, ducksy!"

I lost myself in the crowd, and waited. At every race there was that sudden swelling crescendo, like the evening at the other track when Lucky had been there. My stomach dropped inches every time. I was thankful when the crowd started jamming the exits and it was all over.

The bookmakers paid the few last people off, and then started clearing up their stands. I walked up to Arthur Patterson. I'd had plenty of time by now to prepare a nice way of asking him. But all I did was to blurt it straight out in half a dozen words. He didn't stop to consider it. He just shook his head quickly.

"Sorry. No can do!"

"But he . . . he'd be so grateful if . . ." It was horribly difficult.

Patterson looked at me, not at all unkindly.

"I know the way it is," he said. "But when a chap falls down—he falls down. We all risk it. And we don't expect to be carried if it goes wrong."

"But he'll pay you back in no time . . ."

He shook his head again, more emphatically this time.

"I'd help Lucky out at any ordinary time," he said. "But I can't afford to bury money as deep as all that. Ask any of the fellows along the line here. They'll all say the same. Only yesterday, we saw one of Lucky's I.O.U.'s for a thousand quid. That's not a good advertisement for the borrowing

business. He'll have to call that in before he can call on me."

A sudden awful helplessness seemed to drag the strength right out of me. Flash had been showing that piece of paper all over the place. Wherever I went, whoever I asked, I should find the same thing now.

I moistened my lips with the tip of my tongue. I turned and walked slowly across to the gates and out into the road. The journey back in the bus went on for ever.

CHAPTER X

I GOT BACK TO THE FLAT AT LAST, AND WALKED SLOWLY UP the stairs, miserable at failing in the first thing that Lucky had asked me to do. It was all through Flash deliberately showing that I.O.U. about, but I felt sure that Lucky would have found a way round the difficulty if he had been able to go himself. To deal with men like Flash, and Williams, and Arthur Patterson, it needed a man. I felt weak and ineffective. I never quite knew the next move.

The next move was waiting at the top of the stairs. "It was Doc. He beckoned me into the sitting-room. I followed him, and he closed the door behind us. He looked drawn and peculiar. I was suddenly frightened of what he was going to say.

He said: "I don't like the look of Lucky so much."

"What's happened?" My voice was like a croak.

"He's a bit delirious at present. He's not so good as I thought he was."

"What are you going to do?" I demanded.

"What *can* I do? He won't go to hospital. I've been asking him again and again, but it's no good. He won't go."

"I'll try and persuade him."

Doc nodded eagerly.

"Yes. You try. Perhaps he'll listen to you. I'm just going back to get myself something to eat. You can 'phone me if you want me."

He went down the stairs, and I walked into Lucky's room. He looked at me for a tiny minute as if he didn't know me. Then he suddenly smiled.

"Hullo! Where've you been?"

"I've been out for a bit." I was glad I didn't have to tell him. I took a clean handkerchief out of my bag, and sprinkled some eau-de-Cologne on it, and smoothed it softly across his forehead.

"Lucky," I said, "you're going to be so much more comfortable in hospital."

"Going to be? What do you mean by 'going to be'? I'm not going. For the last time, get that into your head. I'm not going. That fool of a doctor's been pestering me about that for hours. Don't you start. I'm not going!"

"All right, Lucky," I said quickly. "We only thought it would be nicer for you. Nobody's trying to *persuade* you to do anything."

He smiled, and a distant look came into his eyes.

"I'm not going," he said dreamily, "because I've got to go out to play."

"What . . . what do you mean, Lucky?" This must have been what Doc had meant when he said he was delirious.

"I'm going out to play. I've got an important engagement to go and rattle the dice. And they're all going to fall my way tonight. I know it. You're coming, aren't you? You're coming to bring me luck, aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm coming, Lucky." I didn't know what else to say.

"We'll show them," he said. His voice was getting louder. "We'll have 'em all on the floor before we've finished. Six-and-a-one! Six-and-a-one! Six-and-a-one! There she comes, the beauty! Now watch it again! Don't cuddle your money so tight, because Lucky's going to take it away from you. All nice and sweet. There she comes. Like that. Five-and-a-two. You can't stop it. Nobody can!"

I didn't know what to do with him. I wished the doctor hadn't gone.

His eyes were dancing now. His hand went to the little table by the side of the bed, finding his cigarettes. I stepped forward quickly and got one out for him, put it in his mouth and held a match to it. I took one myself.

"Is your back hurting at all now, Lucky?" I wanted to pull him back to sense.

"My back? My back's all right now, thanks. That's finished. That's all over now. Let's get on with the game. I'm putting it all on red. Spin it round, laddie. Red! Red! Red! There she comes! I'll leave it all on red again. This is a baby's game. You can't lose. You can't lose!"

I lowered my head and looked at the floor. If only I could think of something. If only there was something I could do for him.

"What are you cooking, Jo?" he asked suddenly.

I didn't look up. I somehow hated looking at him while he was like that.

"I'm not—cooking anything, Lucky," I said.

"You must be. I can smell cooking."

"It must be coming through the window, Lucky. I can't smell it."

Yes, I could. Suddenly. It wasn't cooking. It was burning. I looked up quickly.

"There's something burning," I said. "Where's your cigarette, Lucky? Where is it? Oh, God!"

He looked where I was looking. Quickly he lifted the cigarette away from where it had been resting. He looked, we both looked, at the bubbly blistered mark on the back of his left hand. His eyes came up to me. They weren't dancing now. Then he looked down again at his hand.

"Lucky," I whispered. I hardly dared ask. "Didn't you—feel it?"

His voice was steady. He was right back to sense again now.

"No. No, I—I didn't feel it. I can't feel it."

We looked at each other. I couldn't even try to hide what I was feeling. His eyes didn't hide anything, either. I put out my hand towards his, but drew it back again.

"I can't feel it," he repeated, as if he could not understand his own words.

He put his other little finger down on to the burn. He touched the weal lightly, apprehensively. Then he prodded it hard, dug his nail down on to it. In slow silence, like a child exploring some incomprehensible conjuring trick, he ran the nail of his right-hand little finger all over the back of his left hand, along the backs of the fingers, then up to the wrist, digging the finger nail sharply down into the flesh at every inch. I watched. I couldn't take my eyes away. It felt like watching something die.

He paused, looked up at me again, gave a quick little half-smile as if he wanted to get some reassurance from me. He didn't get it. Just a blank stare.

He said, in a plaintive voice that prayed for contradiction: "The feeling's gone out of it."

I tried to steady my hand, as I put it slowly down and touched his. I thought it was going to feel funny in some way, but it didn't. It felt just the same. I took it in mine, and lifted it up off the bed a few inches. No. It didn't feel the same. Not quite. It was heavy, or something. I let go of it. It dropped back on to the bed in a dull, silly way.

"Lift it up," I said.

He looked at it. The rest of his body twisted a little. The left arm didn't move.

"I can't lift it."

"Try. You're not trying."

"I am. It's just—nothing happens."

"Does it hurt?"

"No. It feels all right. It just doesn't move."

"Try harder, Lucky. Harder. *Harder!*"

He shook his head.

"I can't. It doesn't move."

"You're not trying, Lucky. It must move. You know it must. Lift it, Lucky. *Lift it!*"

He looked down fiercely at his arm there. We waited. Nothing happened. He looked at me again. I turned, and ran to the telephone, and dialled the doctor's number.

I waited in the sitting-room while Doc examined him. It seemed like nights and days. I jumped when at last I heard the sound of Lucky's door opening. Doc closed it again and came into the room to me.

"What is it?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, and walked over to the drinks.

"What is it?" I asked again. "Don't you know what's wrong with him?"

"Just a bit of temporary paralysis," he said, slopping whisky into a glass.

"Temporary? Will it come all right again?"

"Oh, yes. It's probably just the result of the shock to his spine."

"Probably? Do you mean you're not sure?"

"Don't pester me with questions. I'm doing all I can for him."

He emptied his glass, and poured himself some more. He was like a whisky tank.

"What are you going to do next?" I asked. "Do we just have to wait?"

"We'll see if he's any worse in the morning." Anyway, if he won't go to hospital, it's his own damned fault."

"For mercy's sake!" I said. He seemed to be giving up caring. "You're his doctor, aren't you? He trusts you, doesn't he? Can't you *do* something for him?"

He suddenly burst into a temper.

"What do you expect me to do? He ought to have gone to hospital straight away."

"We must take him. Now."

He shook his head.

"Not me. I've kept alive through taking Lucky's orders. I'll go on taking them."

"You drunken coward," I said. "I'll send for an ambulance. I don't need your help."

He pointed his finger at me, almost threatening.

"Lucky wants to keep out of hospital. He's got his reasons. I've known him longer than you have. Just let me tell you this. If you go against him on a thing like this, he'll be finished with you. Finished!"

I hesitated. I knew what he said was true.

"But we can't just . . ." I didn't like to finish it.

He paced across the room and back, and then stood facing me. I wasn't sure he was quite steady on his feet.

"Can't you get any money anywhere?" he demanded.

"Money? How much? What for?"

"I want to get another doctor to him."

"Get him. Quickly. We can worry about the money afterwards."

"That won't do," he said. "It's got to be a doctor who won't report about the bullet. That kind of doctor wants the money first. I know the man. He'd even operate here if necessary. But he'd want his hundred pounds cash down."

"I . . . don't know where to get that," I said. I wasn't looking at him any more. I was looking out of the room and into the Granada Palace Hotel. I was looking at the line of bookies down at the dog track. I was looking at Flash's I.O.U. dancing in front of my eyes.

"I don't know where . . ." I broke off, and my stomach gave a leap. I looked at Doc again.

"A hundred pounds," I said slowly. "I can get it for you. I'll have it before the night's out. You'll wait here, won't you? Don't leave him."

I walked from the room, and along the passage and into my bedroom. The I.O.U. for a thousand pounds was Flash's idea of "a little present afterwards". All I had to do was put the price up.

I stood for a minute or two, looking at myself in the mirror. It seemed that somehow the mirror didn't answer back properly. It was almost a stranger looking at me. I shook myself away from it, and went across and opened the wardrobe cupboard. The short, black, clingy dress. That was the one. I'd never worn it yet. It looked all right in the shop, but when I got it back it was a bit too much. To-night it will be perfect. Just completely right. Without my belt, that will make it better still. Yes, it clings round me and shows me. That's the way. That's the way. All I've got to do is put the price up.

I went to the mirror again, and got my lipstick out. I

smeared it on as thick as I ever had, thicker. Up at the top a bit, bringing the shape out more; cheating a bit on the bottom lip too, to make it fuller.

I looked again. It wasn't me, now. It mustn't be me. It had to be someone else tonight. Not really me.

You look all right, whoever you are. You look the part all right. All you've got to do is put the price up. That's all. You don't care. You'll do anything for Lucky. If it's going to help him, you just don't care. You'll do anything for Lucky. Well . . . perhaps not absolutely *anything*, but . .

Yes. Anything.

CHAPTER XI

IT WAS GETTING ON FOR EIGHT IN THE EVENING AS I LEFT THE flat. I didn't know any telephone number for Flash, and I could not remember the name of the café so as to look it up in the telephone book. The only hope was to find him there, or to get somebody there to tell me where he was. It had to be tonight. It couldn't wait. Lucky needed that doctor just as quickly as possible.

A 'bus took me to the middle of Shaftesbury Avenue, and I turned off into the side streets there, and after about ten minutes walking I came across the café. I went in, and saw the same man standing behind the counter. I waited till he had got rid of the person he was serving, and then I asked him if Mr. Charles was there. The man recognized me.

"Let's see. You left in a hurry last time, didn't you?"
"What's the name?"

I told him: "Miss Burns."

"I'm not sure if he's here or not. I'll go and see."

He called to a waitress to look after the counter, and walked across the crowded café and disappeared through the curtained door at the other end. I waited by the counter. The man was gone quite a long time, while men at the tables were busy running their eyes all over me. At last, the curtain at the far end was pulled aside, and the man beckoned to me. I hurried through the tables towards him. He didn't say anything, but led the way again up the musty stairway, and knocked on the door at the top. It was opened by Flash. He glanced at me, and came out on to the landing, closing the door behind him. He nodded to the counter-man.

"All right," he said.

The man disappeared down the stairs into the café. Flash looked at me questioningly.

"Charming," he murmured. "To what do I owe this honour?"

"I . . . I just came to see you," I said. I gave him a nervous little smile.

He stroked his lips thoughtfully. Then he smiled in a curly sort of way.

"Does that mean you've come to your senses?"

"Maybe I have. Yes."

He gave me an acting bow.

"You make me the happiest of men," he said. "Come in."

He opened the door and I walked into the room. But as soon as I had taken a couple of steps, I pulled up abruptly. There were three other men, sitting at a table, looking at me. I turned quickly to Flash.

"I wanted to see you alone," I said.

He shut the door, and looked towards the men, and laughed.

"You hear that? Do you hear that? She wants to see me alone. What you fellows need is a little of my sex-appeal, eh?"

The laugh went round them. One of them, a tiny short man, lifting a pack of cards from the table, and squirting the cards skilfully from one hand to the other without looking at them, ran his eyes insolently up and down me, moving his head with his eyes to make it more obvious.

"What I need, personally," he said, "is a little of what she's got."

Flash put up his hand in mock disapproval.

"Now, now," he said. "What she's got is a secret."

"Yes? Give me three guesses and I'll get three bull's eyes!"

"I think you're very rude!" said Flash, putting on a kind of parson's voice. "Don't you know a respectable young lady when you see one?"

"I ain't seen enough of her yet." The short man looked delighted when everybody laughed.

Flash was standing close against me. I felt his hand at the back of my neck, and before I could even move or look round, he had given a sudden long pull downwards, and my coat was on the floor.

The short man clapped his hands in applause as if he were in a theatre.

"Encore!" he called. He got a laugh every time.

I took a couple of steps away from Flash, and stood there in the middle of the room. Behind my lips, my teeth were tight together. The door was there. It wasn't even locked. But that wasn't any good. I had come here for something. I couldn't go away without it.

Flash dropped himself into an armchair. I didn't know whether to stand or sit or what to do. The little man got up from the table, and started to come slowly towards me. He didn't get far. Flash spat the words out at him.

"Sit down! Who told you to touch?"

The little man sat down with a bump. He gave a quick, nervous little look at Flash. It seemed to be all right. He smiled.

"You know me, Flash. I never was much good at sitting quiet with a bun dangling under my nose."

Flash chuckled.

"I've got pretty good taste, eh?" he asked.

I wished I had not put on that clingy black dress. In front of eyes like theirs, it felt like being naked.

"She's certainly got her good points," said one of them.

Somehow, standing there watching them leer at you, hearing them talk that way, seeing the cheapness of them, it wasn't bad because it wasn't real. You felt you were standing up on a platform, looking down into muck. You couldn't see the detail. There was too much of it. The thing was out of focus, and it didn't seem to touch you.

Flash must have guessed that I needed something pretty badly. He was on top, and he knew it. All this performance was just to rub it in. Maybe it was just a way to get his pride back. If some of these men knew about the way Lucky had hit him at the dice game, and if they knew about Lucky and me, this little turn that Flash was putting on now would help to make him big again. I didn't care. There was only one thing that mattered to me, and that was what I had come for. What I had to do was put the price up. If this was going to help, I didn't care.

Flash waved his hand towards the other armchair.

"Why don't you sit down, charming? The boys are such perfect gentlemen, they'll feel they ought to stand up if you don't sit down."

There wasn't much point in standing up. I went to the armchair and sat down in it as carefully as I could. The chair was facing the men at the table. My frock was the kind that climbs up your knees if you sit down low. The little man-bent forward ostentatiously. His face nearly made you sick. Even from across the room like that, you could almost feel his stubby fingers trying to fuddle with you.

Flash looked across at him, and seemed to think that things had gone on long enough. He stood up.

"All right, all right," he said. "If you like the advert—

post your money in. Now get out and leave us alone, will you? You heard her say she wanted to be alone with me, didn't you? Got to please a lady, y'know."

The men got up from the table. The little one had that look in his eyes that a man gets when he can't cool down again. The other two went across towards the door. The little one came and stood in front of me. His mouth was open and the sides of his nose were quivering.

Flash spoke to him curtly.

"Outside!"

The little man took no notice. He went on looking at me. Without turning his head, he said: "I'll take her with me."

"Get out!" It sounded as if Flash didn't like having to say things twice to such a little fellow. But it still made no impression. He stood there, looking at me. I knew, I could see it in his fishy eyes, it had suddenly taken right hold of him.

He took a step forward towards me. Flash loved it. He only had to hit him once. He was such a little man, and he wasn't even looking. The other two hauled him out on to the landing, and shut the door behind them.

Flash turned to me.

"I'm beginning to think that you must be very attractive," he said. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, and pretended to dust the dirt from the back of his fist. Then he walked over to the cocktail cabinet.

"What will you have?"

"A little brandy, please," I said. I needed it.

He handed me the glass. I started to drink it and I started to feel better. I wanted a bit of dutch courage now. What you might do in the heat of the moment was harder to do when you were cold.

Flash sat down again in the other armchair, and leaned back comfortably.

"Well now," he said, with the note of unhurried expectation that a doctor uses, "this little visit is really delightful. May I ask what made you change your mind so soon?"

"I want that I.O.U. of Lucky's," I said.

"Yes, yes, of course you do. I knew you would, sooner or later. But I must confess that your attitude last time you were here made me think that it might be a little longer before you came to your senses. Isn't Lucky so well?"

"Lucky's all right," I said, watching him closely.

"Is he? I heard he was a little indisposed."

"Who told you that?" I asked quickly. The two men I had tried to borrow money from were the only people I had

told. If Flash knew about it, I might be near a clue as to who had shot Lucky. But he wasn't giving anything away.

"I can't remember who told me," he replied casually. "It's just one of those things that get whispered around. Isn't it true?"

"That's nothing to do with it," I said. "When I came here before, you made a proposition. You offered to give me that I.O.U. of Lucky's in return for . . ." I hesitated, and shrugged my shoulders. "In return for what you wanted."

Flash smiled.

"Did I?" he asked. "That was very generous of me, wasn't it?"

"I want that I.O.U.," I said. "I've come here to tell you that I'll agree to your bargain, if you will raise your offer very slightly."

He looked at me incredulously.

"But my dear—surely it's already an all-time record?"

"I want the I.O.U. and a hundred pounds in cash," I said bluntly.

Flash rubbed his hands together in pleasure.

"This is really delightful," he said. "What would Lucky say if he could hear his girl haggling over the price with me? If he could only see us now, I'd double the price for the pleasure of watching his face."

The marks on Flash's face, the marks that Lucky had put there, at that moment they were the nicest things I had ever seen.

"The I.O.U. and a hundred pounds," I said again. He looked at me with a thoughtful frown, pretending to be weighing the matter up very carefully.

"And what exactly do I get for all that?" he asked.

"You get—what you wanted," I said.

"But what do I get?" he went on insistently. "What are you going to *do* for the money?"

I had been thinking the same as anyone else would have thought. I couldn't imagine what he wanted me to say.

"I . . . What you want, I suppose," I said flatly. It sounded terribly silly, being made to put it into words.

He still wasn't satisfied. "What exactly are you going to do?" he asked. "How are you going to start?"

I stared at him. I was beginning to wonder whether he was all right, whether he was queer.

My question faltered a bit. "What do you—want to do?"

He laughed. "I'm asking you to tell me," he said. "I'm simply asking you to describe what you are going

to do for this enormous sum of money that you're asking for."

I said firmly and deliberately: "I'm going to do just what you want to do."

"Yes, of course, I know that. You wouldn't get the money unless you did. But first I want to hear you say what you're going to do."

"There's nothing to say," I said, bewildered. "You know, just as well as I do."

He lighted a cigarette, and blew a cloud of smoke up towards the ceiling, gazing dreamily after it as it went.

"It's funny," he said, "how a girl doesn't mind doing things, but hates to talk about them." He looked towards me. "I should rather like to hear it from such pretty lips. In fact, I'm making it part of the bargain."

I hadn't seen it before. Now, it was suddenly clear. A vicious streak in his perverted mind was going to look for pleasure in my embarrassment. He wanted things to be made still more obvious and deliberate.

I took careful hold of myself. In my mind, I said my piece over. "All you've got to do is put the price up. If it's going to help Lucky, you don't care. You just don't care."

I gave Flash a smile. "I'm going to let you make love to me," I said.

He shook his head.

"You're skipping too much," he said. "Start from the beginning. You're sitting in that chair. What do you do first? What's the very first thing you do?"

"I . . ."

There was silence for a few moments.

"Come on. What do you do? What's the first thing you do?"

"I think it's time we discussed your side of the bargain," I said. "Before we go any further, I want to see the I.O.U. and the hundred pounds."

He put his hand to his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a piece of paper.

"Here's the I.O.U.," he said. "You don't imagine that I always carry a hundred pounds about with me, do you?"

"I want to see it first," I said firmly. "It's got to be right here in this room."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "I'll give you a cheque. Here—I'll write it now."

"I don't want a cheque," I said. "I want cash."

"But I haven't got it on me."

"You can get it. Your friends downstairs can get it for you."

He muttered something impatiently, and got up out of his chair.

"I'll see," he said.

He went out of the room and shut the door behind him. I sat there alone, waiting. I felt cold right through. Not cold in the ordinary way, but cold inside me. I wasn't frightened. I wasn't even feeling any horror or disgust. The things inside me had stopped working. They were cold and still; they weren't working enough to feel frightened. I simply hoped he wouldn't be too long.

He wasn't long. After about ten minutes the door opened, and he came in holding a bundle of notes in his hand. He went to the table, and counted them out so that I could see. He laid the I.O.U. on top of them.

"There they are," he said.

I thought, now it's coming. This is the moment when you just let everything go black. This is the moment when you change into somebody else. You've made up your mind to it. It's going to help Lucky, and you just don't care. You can shut your eyes and shut your heart, and it will soon be over. You've been waiting for it, you're ready, and now it's coming.

But Flash was sitting down in his armchair again. He rested his head back, lay his arms along the arms of the chair, and looked at me lazily.

"I'm ready," he said.

We both sat there, in our armchairs. I didn't know what we were waiting for. How did it come, with a man like Flash? Did he coax you, smooth you? Or did he suddenly break into life and rush himself out of control?

"I'm ready," he said again.

"I . . . I'm ready, too," I said. I felt as if I were facing up to an operation.

"Come on, then," he said. "What are you waiting for? Why don't you start?"

He made no effort to move himself. He just sat there, lay there in the chair, looking at me with a faint smile.

"You don't seem to understand," he said. "You're getting paid for this, remember. Come on. I'm waiting. Don't you want to kiss me?" He laughed. "I promise I won't resist," he said.

I couldn't believe it for a minute. I thought I had faced it all in my mind. I thought I was ready. I thought that all I had to do was shut my eyes. But I hadn't faced this. It wasn't going to be like this. It couldn't be. This wasn't the way it happened. It was the other way round. You simply

shut your eyes and didn't struggle. You shut your eyes and didn't care, because of something else, because of the money, because of the doctor, because of Lucky. You shut your eyes and everything was blotted out until it was all over. You'd faced it, you were ready, you didn't care.

But not like this. You hadn't thought of this. It took a slug like Flash to think of this. You couldn't do it. Not for everything in the world, not if you knew it was Lucky's life, you couldn't do this. You couldn't do it because it wasn't in you. It wouldn't come, it wouldn't work, you just couldn't make it happen.

My arms and legs and body felt as if they were clamped down helpless on the chair. It wasn't any good. I couldn't make it happen.

His eyes were on me, waiting for me. I slid down in my chair a bit. My mouth came slightly open. My eyes were softly meeting his. I lay there, giving him everything I could. You can do it when you try.

It did what it was meant to do. He got up out of his chair, and walked slowly, very slowly, over towards me. He bent down, and took hold of my hands, one in each of his. He gripped them, pinched them, hard. I felt that something dreadful was going to happen any moment. He suddenly took his hands away, and slapped my face, both sides, one after the other.

"You're Lucky's girl," he said. "That's what you are. You're Lucky's girl. And I've bought you. I've bought you for cash. Lucky's girl. The great Lucky. I'm taking his girl. Lucky's girl."

He put a hand up into my hair, mussed it about, pulled it. The look on his face, I'd never seen it anywhere before. It made you stop feeling like a human being.

I couldn't move. He slapped my face again, hard. I didn't seem to feel anything.

"Take that home to Lucky," he whispered. "And that."

He leaned down lower, looking at me, breathing hard. Then his hand went to the neck of my frock and he took hold of it.

"And now I'll give you something for yourself," he said.

He pulled at the neck of my frock. He was going to tear it. Instinctively I put up my hand to stop him. He laughed.

"Ah! A little healthy opposition, eh?"

He backed away from me, and went across to a radio set and switched it on. It was playing dance music. He turned it up loud. I pulled my skirt down a bit. He came back, slowly, towards me again. He hesitated, went to the door

and turned the key in the lock. Then he came and stood in front of me again.

"A little music," he said, "just to cover up any complaints if you suddenly decided you didn't like it after all. You see, I've got a feeling that maybe I'm going to be a bit fierce with Lucky's girl."

He took hold of my wrist with his hand. His fingers were digging right into me. I could feel things now all right. With a sudden heaving jerk he pulled me out of the chair, on to my feet, right up against him. His other arm came round my back and clamped itself round me. I was pressed hard against him. His mouth came down, wide open. The whole of my lips were right inside his teeth. I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe. The radio music was dinning in my ears. He crushed me harder, closer, tighter.

It went snap, all of a sudden. I couldn't even say my piece again. I'd come for this, eyes open, but it wasn't any good. You couldn't. You couldn't. You might as well try to spoon sick back into your mouth.

I tried to break away from him. I jerked my head away and let my breath out. I struggled and twisted, but his arms were locked round me. A sort of panic feeling got hold of me. I didn't know what I was doing. I only knew that I had to get away from him, I had to stop him. Anyhow. Quickly. Stop him. Anything you like.

I drew back one of my legs. I didn't know what I was doing. I suddenly clenched my teeth and drove my knee into the pit of his stomach as hard as I could.

I'd never heard a man scream before.

I shut my eyes for a minute. There weren't any arms locked round me any more. There weren't any teeth on my face any more. There was nothing to struggle with now.

He was crouched down, half on the floor, his weight thrown on to one of his hands. There was nothing to struggle with.

I came to life, and grabbed my coat, and dived for the door. Something stopped me. Things were coming back. I looked across to the table. There it was. That was what I'd come for. I grabbed the money and the I.O.U., and went through the door and rushed down the stairs with the music coming after me.

CHAPTER XII

AS I RUSHED ACROSS THE CAFÉ, TWO MEN WHO WERE SITTING at a table jumped up, but I was past them before they could

reach the channel through the tables. But the man behind the counter saw me coming, and he must have put two and two together quickly. He ran from behind the counter, and dived at me as I approached the door. I dodged to one side, but his outstretched arm just reached me. I felt his fingers grab the sleeve of my coat. The sudden pull brought me swinging round, but the man was off his balance and he went falling forward; and as I wrenched my arm away, he left go to use his hand to save himself. I pulled the door of the café open, and as I slipped out into the street I glanced over my shoulder. One of the two men who had got up from the table was standing indecisively in the middle of the café. The other was disappearing through the curtained door at the back. I turned and ran as fast as I could along the street.

There weren't very many people about. I had taken the direction away from Shaftesbury Avenue, and in a few seconds I was running along a street that was practically deserted. I stopped, to get my breath back. My heart was pumping hard. And then, above the thudding inside me, came the sharper sound of running feet.

Under a street lamp, about two hundred yards down the road, came two men running after me. I started on again, running so hard that I thought my breath would burst out of me. But the sound of the feet behind me was nearer, clearer all the time.

I dodged round a couple of corners quickly, but I couldn't shake them off. They were gradually creeping up on me. I looked for somewhere to dodge in and hide, but apart from occasional cafés and restaurants, there didn't seem anywhere to go, and I didn't dare go into one of those in case they saw me.

Suddenly, ahead of me, walking the other way, I saw the tall, steady, comforting form of a policeman. Instinctively I made towards him, but as I approached him I suddenly realized that what I had just done put me on the other side of things. I couldn't ask for help from him. I ought to be running away from him. There was nobody now to whom I could turn for help.

But the instinct to shelter behind him made me stop running and walk quickly up to him. I knew that while I was talking to him, the men wouldn't dare to touch me. They wouldn't dare to ask for his support any more than I would. At least I could make conversation with the policeman while I got my breath back.

"Please," I said, "could you tell me where Cheriton House is?"

"Cheriton House! Well, I dunno as I could. You seem a bit out of breath, miss."

"Yes," I said. "I've been hurrying, because I had an appointment and I am rather late for it."

As we stood there, I was able to look back along the way I had come. The two men had seen me stop by the policeman, and they had pulled up abruptly. They were standing on the pavement, lounging casually, waiting.

"Cheriton House?" The policeman shook his head. "I dunno as I've heard of that," he said. "Which street is it in?"

"What street is this?" I asked.

"This is Mallam Street."

"Mallam Street. That's right," I said. "It should be somewhere here."

"What kind of a building would it be? They're mostly shops and restaurants along here."

"I think the place I am looking for is a flat over a shop," I said. "I don't know if it has got a number or not. The people I was going to see said that it was Cheriton House, and that there was a bell with their name on it."

"Cheriton House?" he said again, looking up and down the darkness of the street as if he didn't like being beaten. I was keeping my eye on the two men standing down the street. They were half hidden in the shadows, but I could see them clearly enough. They were waiting quite patiently. They must have guessed that I was only playing for time. It was hopeless to think that they would give up the chase just because I was standing talking to a policeman, and I couldn't go on talking to him indefinitely. The question of this fictitious address was already beginning to fizzle out.

"I don't think I can help you, miss," the policeman was saying. "I should ask in one of these cafés if I was you. They'll probably know."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'll do that. That's probably the best idea."

For several drawn-out seconds I still stood there with him. I simply had to leave him now. There wasn't anything else to do. The men were waiting, watching for me. I had to leave him now. I put it off for a few more seconds. I stood there with him. It must have been half a minute. He was beginning to look at me queerly.

Then, like some unbelievable gift from heaven, a taxi came crawling slowly along the street. Its flag was up. I stepped out into the road and put my hand up.

"I think I must have got the address wrong," I said to the policeman quickly. "Thanks very much."

I got into the cab and told the driver to take me to Merton Place. A soothing wave of relief went over me as we started to move forward. I looked out of the little back window to see what the two men were doing.

The relief dropped out of me. The pounding fear was suddenly there again. Another taxi had drawn up by the kerb farther down the road, and the two men were just getting into it.

"Drive as fast as you possibly can," I said to the driver. "I'll give you extra money if you go really quickly."

We gathered speed. Through the back window, I watched the lights of the other taxi disappear round the corner, come again, disappear, come again. My driver was trying, but so was the other one too. The minutes went by, the district changed, but still those lights were there behind. I could not go back to the flat unless I could throw off that other taxi somehow. Those men were not likely to know where I lived. If I could get back without them actually seeing, it might be all right; but it was no good going to the flat while they were so close on my heels. I leaned forward and spoke to the driver again.

"Don't go to Merton Place yet," I said. "Just drive round and round the streets as fast as you can."

"Wot's the idea?" he asked suspiciously, and started to slow down a bit.

I remembered the time I had first met Lucky. He had got the very last ounce out of the taxi driver that night. I could do the same. His story would do just as well for me as it had for him.

"I am a detective," I told the driver. "I am attached to the special women's branch of Scotland Yard. You probably noticed that I was with a policeman when I stopped your cab. I am being trailed by some people in another cab behind us. They don't know that I am from Scotland Yard. You must help me get away from them. Drive as fast as you like. Don't worry about traffic lights or policemen. I will make it all right with the police. Just give this cab that's following us the slip. You will be well paid for it."

It worked like a charm again. The driver threw himself into the job with enthusiasm. We started to spin through the streets at a frightening speed, dodging round the traffic and going on the wrong side of the road half the time. But as I watched through the back window, I could see that the other taxi was taking just as many chances as we were. Sometimes,

when we overtook little batches of traffic, it was hard to tell whether we had lost those two little following lights or not, but every time we got into quieter streets, there were those two little lights doggedly sticking behind us.

We went on and on. My driver was doing all he could, but we couldn't get away from that other cab. It didn't seem to be trying to overtake us. I guessed that the men were simply hanging on, waiting for me to stop somewhere. I urged the driver on faster and faster, but it didn't do any good. Only by some extraordinary fluke of the traffic were we going to be able to throw the other taxi off the scent, and we might have to drive round for hours before such a fluke occurred. I began to wonder how long my driver would be content to go on like this. We couldn't keep it up much longer. I had to get back to Lucky. I couldn't waste the whole night charging round and round like this. I dug right into my brains to look for an idea for throwing those two men off, so that I could get into the flat without them following me. If I couldn't stop them, wasn't there anyone else who could?

There it was, the answer, the possible way out. Suddenly it stood up clear and plain in the front of my mind. I remembered, months ago, that evening with Peggy, when we had had a drink or two and then decided very bravely to take a look at some of the low haunts. That public-house down near the river, where we had poked our noses in and scampered back to civilization as fast as we could. That was just the kind of place to find someone to do this job for me. I had funkèd the very sight of the place that night with Peggy, but now it was different. Now I didn't seem to feel those things any more. I leaned forward, and asked the cabby if he knew the place.

"It's a favourite place with the sailors," I told him. "As far as I can remember, it is over Tower Bridge, and then a bit to the left. It's on the corner of a short street that runs down to the river."

"You don't mean the Seven Crowned Heads?" he asked. "The one where they've got a lot of dummy crowned heads dangling from the ceiling as ornaments?"

"That's it," I said. "I remember now. Keep going, and work your way round, driving in that direction."

I knew that it might not be any good, but at least it was a chance, and at least I wouldn't be any worse off there than I was in this cab.

I took a couple of pounds from Flash's money, and passed it through the sliding window to the cabby.

"Put this in your pocket now," I said, "because when we

get to the pub, I want to jump out of here and dive in through the door without waiting. That other cab is still behind us; what I want you to do is to drive up to the pub as fast as you can, jamming on your brakes and pulling up suddenly outside it; then as soon as I have jumped out of the cab, you clear straight off."

"Right y'are, lady," he answered. There was excitement in his voice, and I knew that he would do his best.

We came to the street at the other end of which was the public house. I took a last look out of the back window. The lights of the other taxi were still there. I pulled back the catch of the door, and held it just open. The driver did his part perfectly. He went full speed to within about fifteen yards of the pub, and then put his brakes on hard. The tyres squealed on the roadway and the cab pulled up with a sudden jerk. I jumped on to the pavement, and dashed straight in through the door.

I was right inside before the other taxi had drawn up. I had to stop just inside the door for a couple of seconds, to blink my eyes and get them used to the place.

The smoke was billowing so thickly across the room that it might have been on fire. Men were shouting and singing and swaying all over the floor. In one of the corners a piano was jangling. The stink of tobacco and spirits and beer was like a knife up your nose.

Half the men there were sailors. As soon as my eyes could pierce the fog, I wriggled my way through to the far end of the bar, and picked out two of them without waiting to do any choosing. They were talking together. I bumped against one of them, and as they looked round at me I gave them the kind of smile they like.

"Hullo there, sister!" One of them clapped me on the back and nearly knocked me over.

"Hullo, yourself!" I said. "What are you drinking?" I put one of the pound notes down on the counter.

"Stow it away, we'll buy you one. Hey! Bert," he called to one of the men behind the bar. "Give my baby sister a drink, will you?"

Bert lifted an eyebrow to know what I would have.

"Gin and lime," I told him.

I squeezed tight against the bar between the two sailors, and lifted my glass and raised it to them.

"Here's to a happy evening," I said with a smile.

"Have you dropped right out of heaven?" one of them laughed.

"Maybe," I answered. I gave them my eyes and my teeth and everything I could. Then I took a quick look across the room. The two men had come in. They were down at the other end of the bar, having a drink and watching me, waiting. Seeing them in the light now, they looked a nasty pair. I was glad that my two sailors looked like a couple of professional strong men.

I pushed my pound note forward through the puddle of spilt drink that was slopping all over the counter.

"Set these up again," I said to Bert, indicating the three glasses.

"Sweetheart," one of the sailors laughed, "you really must have come out of heaven. Are you staying down on earth for the evening? If so, what do you say?"

The other one lifted up the palm of an enormous hand and gave him a push in the chest.

"I saw her first," he said. "Didn't I, honey?"

I gave them both some more of everything.

"We'll have to work that out carefully," I said. "There's plenty of time yet. By the way, where are you boys going to drink when they shut this pub up?"

"Sweetheart, if anyone tries to shut this pub up until you're ready to go, I'll break him into little pieces."

I laughed. "Don't waste your time," I said. "They'll be closing in about ten minutes now, and who wants to stay here any longer? Not us. I can take you to a place where you can drink all night without anybody interrupting."

"You can? Then lead us to it, baby. I'm sick of the rotten booze they dish out here."

I had hardly believed that it would be that easy. We had one more round of drinks there, and when we had drunk them, I linked arm in arm with the sailors, one on each side of me, and we shoved our way through the crowd towards the door.

Some of their pals laughed and shouted at them as we went. Out of the corner of my eye, I was watching the two men at the other end of the bar. As they saw us going, they finished off their drinks quickly, and started to follow us out.

We started walking rather lurchingly along the street. I was hanging tightly on to both of them. They started to sing. The fresh air had hit them a bit. The drunker they looked from behind, the better that would probably be for me.

I led them along, not knowing where we were going, looking for the quietest streets I could find. It was close on eleven o'clock now, and it wasn't difficult to find streets that were practically deserted. I kept turning my head to look back

over my shoulder; the two men were following quietly twenty or thirty yards behind. I wondered if they would dare to break in.

We went round two or three corners, but still they kept their distance. I tugged at my sailors' arms and made them stop singing.

"Listen," I said. "Don't look round, you'll spoil everything if you look round now. *Don't look round.*"

As they both started to look round I tugged harder at their arms and stopped them just in time.

"Two men are following me. They're always following me. They are always making a nuisance of themselves. No, *don't look round.*" I shook their arms again and stopped them from looking. "One of these days I am hoping to find a couple of fellows who'll give them what they deserve."

At that moment we came to a sharp corner and I swung them quickly round it. We stopped. I let go of their arms.

"You've got the fellows with you now, sweetheart. It'll be a real pleasure, won't it, Mick?"

"A real pleasure!" the other one agreed.

The footsteps came up to the corner, and the two men followed us. They walked straight into the arms of the sailors.

"Well, well, well! And who do you think you're following?"

"You'd better clear off," said one of the men quickly.

"We've got a few questions to ask this girl."

"You have? That's fine. We'll answer them."

I heard a sickening smack of knuckles against soft flesh. Both pairs started together, as if someone had blown a whistle. The sailors were tough, but so were the other two. They were all mixed up in a flurry of whirling arms and kicking legs. Now was the time. They were far too busy to worry about me. I turned, and went to dodge back round the corner and away.

But one of the men had seen me. He dived across the pavement to stop me. I think he meant to grab hold of me, but as I twisted to avoid him, his hand came thudding into my face and blotted everything out. I knew I was staggering backwards, leaning against the wall, slithering down, flopping on to the pavement. And then there was nothing but a thick, black buzzing in my head.

It seemed like ages, but it can't have been more than seconds. As things came suddenly rushing back, I could see the four of them, two pairs, rolling on the ground, clutching each other, grunting and puffing and swearing.

I stood up quickly. I had to hold on to the wall for a moment while the dizziness went away. And then I rushed back round the corner, and up the street, and round another

corner, and through an alleyway and up a street again. When at last I paused and listened, I could hear confused shouting in the distance, but there was nobody coming after me.

I found my way to a main street, and picked up a taxi and set off back towards the flat. My left eye was starting to throb with pain, and I paid off the taxi outside a big all-night restaurant in Piccadilly, and went down into the cloakroom to have a look. The skin was just grazed off the cheekbone a bit, but that was all. I bathed it, and did it up with powder, and hurried off back to the flat.

CHAPTER XIII

I HAD NOT BEEN AWAY FROM LUCKY SO VERY LONG. AND now I was coming back with the I.O.U. and most of a hundred pounds. I felt as if that bundle of paper was the answer to everything. We could get that other doctor to Lucky now. We could call him out of bed and have him round in half an hour. The money was waiting for him. And the I.O.U. was not hanging over our heads any longer. The solution to everything was in that bundle of paper. I was tired, very tired, but as I turned into Merton Place I broke into a run to save a few more seconds. Things were going to be all right now. The first thing to do was to get that other doctor quickly. That was the start of everything.

As I reached the street door to the flat, a scruffy little urchin suddenly popped out of the darkness from somewhere, and spoke to me.

"Are you the lady wot lives 'ere?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"I got a letter for you."

He held out an envelope. I hesitated, took it from him, looked down, and saw that there was no name or address written on it.

"Who gave you this?" I asked. But he wasn't waiting. He turned and went scampering away down the street and round the corner.

I opened the door and went inside, and stood at the bottom of the stairs while I quickly tore the envelope open and pulled out the piece of paper. There were two or three lines scrawled in ink. I read it through quickly.

We have seen your doctor friend smelling round, so perhaps the accident the other night was not too successful. Give Lucky our love, and tell him we are coming to call on him, to see if a bit of rattling about will help him to get better.

I read it again, slowly. The words seemed to go right inside me, digging me somewhere so that I felt sick. I stared at the piece of paper. The words went blurred and muddled, and I stood there looking at nothing, looking at the paper and not seeing anything. I felt a fury rising up inside me, and I almost forgot about everything else. I didn't know how long I stood there. Seconds, minutes; I didn't know.

Then suddenly I came back to the urgency of the moment. I crushed the piece of paper fiercely in my hand, and ran up the stairs to the flat. Doc must have heard me coming. As I reached the passage, he came out of Lucky's room, closed the door quietly behind him, and beckoned me into the sitting-room.

"It's all right," I said quickly. "I've got the money you wanted for the other doctor."

He was stinking of whisky. The whole room was stinking of whisky. He stood there, looking at me, as if he didn't like to say something. He didn't say anything. He just stood there, looking at me.

I said again: "I've got the money for the other doctor. Here it is. You can 'phone him straight away."

He shook his head.

"He's been here," he said.

"Been here?"

"Yes. I couldn't wait for you. I 'phoned him and pretended I'd got the money here waiting for him. He came."

He picked up his glass from the table and took a drink. I forced the words out of my mouth.

"What's happened?"

He shook his head again.

"Nothing," he said. "He had a look at Lucky. He's cleared off again now, before he gets mixed up. He says it's too late to do anything."

His voice seemed to come from miles away. I put my hand out and found something to steady myself against. I had to wait a minute before I could speak again.

"You mean he's going to . . ."

I didn't have to ask. He didn't have to tell me.

I looked at his sotted face and his bleary eyes, and I suddenly wanted to do something to him. I didn't know what. I just wanted to do something to him. I took a quick step towards him and knocked the glass out of his hand. It was all I could think of.

I said: "You dirty rotten doctor!"

I stood there, trembling in front of him. And then, I

swallowed just in time, and I turned round and went out of the room and across to Lucky's door.

I turned the handle gently, quietly, and pushed the door slowly open and put my head round. I didn't know what I expected to see, but it wasn't like that. From the bed, Lucky smiled across at me.

"Hullo," he said. "I was hoping you'd come back soon."

I went in and closed the door behind me, and walked over to the side of the bed.

"Sorry if I've been a long time," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"All right," he said. "No pain at all. Just—tired a bit."

He didn't look any worse than when I had left him. He looked better, in a way. More natural. He wasn't delirious now. He was smiling, and his eyes were steady.

I put my hand under his head, and eased it up, and smoothed his pillow over. He didn't protest. He went on smiling at me.

"I was hoping you'd come back soon," he said again.

"Were you? Were you, Lucky? Well—here I am."

"Yes. Here you are. And now, all the things I've been waiting to say seem to have dried up on me."

"The things you've been waiting to say, Lucky? What have you been waiting to say?"

"I don't know. A lot of silly things. I was hoping you'd come back soon enough, so that I would—have time to tell you."

"You've got plenty of time to tell me things, Lucky. You've got all the time in the world."

His eyes came steadily into mine. They weren't afraid of anything. But there wasn't anything they didn't know. It was only his mouth that smiled.

"No fooling, Jo. No fooling any more. It isn't exactly all the time in the world."

Our eyes were saying and knowing things that couldn't be put into words. It was like a secret that we hardly dared to share. We looked at each other, silent, half bewildered. It was something that you couldn't bring yourself to understand.

I looked away. It felt like leaving him all alone, and I looked back to him quickly. He shook his head slightly.

"You ought to be smiling for me, Jo. You always did. You always must."

"Yes. Yes, Lucky. I will."

"But you're not."

"Yes I am. There. I am now. Aren't I?"

"Light me a cigarette, will you?"

I picked up his packet from the bedside table. I was glad to have something to do. It was like opening a valve. I took one out of the packet and put it between his lips. I struck a match and held it while he puffed. Then I shook the match out, took another cigarette out of the packet, struck another match and lighted it for myself.

"Look at that smoke ring," he said. "You can try for hours, and not make one. And then, when you're not thinking about it, you do a perfect one by accident."

We watched it go slowly across the room and up towards the ceiling. It mused itself up in the end.

"What's the time?" he asked.

"A bit after midnight, Lucky. Nearly half-past twelve, I think." There was a clock on the mantelpiece, but it had got twisted round so that he couldn't see it from the bed. I went over and turned it round so that it faced him.

"No. Don't do that," he said. "I don't want to count the time." I turned it away again.

"Come back here, Jo," he said. "Close to the bed. I've got some things to tell you."

I sat down on the chair again. It was right up against the bed, touching.

"What is it, Lucky?"

"I don't know how to put it," he said. "Maybe it's just that I want to say sorry for everything."

"Sorry? But there's nothing to be sorry about. Nothing."

"Oh, yes there is. About you and me. About everything to do with you and me."

"How do you mean, Lucky? What is there to be sorry about?"

"I fought it all back inside me, Jo. When it wanted to come, I pushed it back and hid it away. I could see the same thing showing out of you all the time. You didn't hide it. You were loving me all the time. And I pushed it all back inside me. I bottled it up tight. I was frightened of it. Not for itself, but because of what it might do. It was all this—superstitious business."

His words were halting, fumbling. Mine wouldn't come at all.

"I thought it would smash the luck," he went on. "You see—I took that mascot stuff so seriously. I've always been a bit like that. I thought that in you I'd found the key to

every single fluke there was. And then, inside my head, the arguments got all mixed up. If I'd taken you up as a mascot, you had to stay that way. You couldn't be anything else. You'd only bring the luck as long as you were cold and distant and detached. And I wanted the luck so badly that I threw everything else away for it."

"I wasn't very good at it, was I, Lucky? I didn't bring the luck for long."

"To hell with it all," he said. "It doesn't matter any more. Kiss me, Jo."

I leaned forward and downward, and watched his face come nearer. It wasn't true, it wasn't real, I didn't care.

I lay my parted lips softly against his. I pressed them gradually closer. His right arm, the one that still worked, came over and found me.

This was real, this was true all right.

This feeling. It's down in the secret parts of you, it's up in your head as well. You want to be sick but you know you're not going to be. You're not sure. Maybe this is what you feel like before you faint. You want a drink of water. You're trembling inside. Right inside. Your legs are quivering. You're frightened of yourself. Oh please, stop making things so beautiful—it hurts so much—it makes you feel so ill.

I pulled my mouth away and breathed in fiercely.

"Lucky," I whispered. "Lucky, darling."

His eyes were softer, closer than they had ever been before. There weren't any shutters behind them any more.

"Tell me, Lucky," I whispered. "How long have you been pushing it back inside you?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know. I'm not quite sure. Perhaps all the time."

"You mean—perhaps—even right back when we danced together that night "

"When we danced together? That was years ago."

"No. Only weeks. Not many weeks, either."

"It seems a long time, doesn't it? I don't know. Yes, maybe I was pushing something back even then. I think I must have been."

"You were," I said. "I knew. I knew all the time."

"You couldn't have done. I didn't show it to you."

"You didn't show it. But I knew. I could feel it somewhere. At least, I thought I could. I wanted it so much that I thought I could."

"Was it like that with you all the time, Jo?"

"All the time. Right from the very first moment. And stronger all the time."

"You must have hated me sometimes," he said.

"No. Why should I? I took something from you that you couldn't keep away from me. Some part from right inside you, I took it and fixed it into me. You didn't know, but I had it all the time. It worked like an echo. When you were happy, so was I. When anything hurt you, it hurt me, as well. I felt I had a part of you inside me. I still have. I always will have. More than ever, now."

He said: "I'd be alone now if it wasn't for you. I wouldn't like to be alone now."

"You won't be alone, Lucky," I said. "I won't leave you. I won't ever leave you."

The telephone bell was ringing in the sitting-room. I leaned across and kissed him again.

"I used to sit and look at you all the time you were playing," I said. "When you lost, I lost."

"When I went out playing without you, I hated it. I didn't enjoy it a bit."

The telephone bell was still ringing. Lucky frowned at it.

"Whoever it is," he said. "Tell them to go to hell."

I walked across the passage to the sitting-room. Doc had gone. There was a note from him on the telephone table, and a couple of tablets by it.

I picked up the 'phone and said hullo. A voice said: "We've just taken Flash to hospital. We've not got any orders from him yet, except to get an I.O.U. and a hundred quid from you straight away. Either bring it straight over to the café, or we're coming up to see you, and we'll be in a bad temper."

"Go to hell," I said back into the 'phone. I slammed it down on to the holder. Then I looked at the note from Doc.

There's nothing I can do for him tonight. I'll be back in the morning in case he is in any pain. If he gets restless, give him these two tablets.

The telephone started to ring again. I lifted the receiver off and left it lying on the table. Then I went back into Lucky's room.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"A wrong number," I said quickly. "I don't know who it was."

"Are you sure there wasn't any message?" His voice made it clear that he didn't believe me. He lifted his hand

and waggled a piece of crumpled paper. It was the threatening note I had received as I entered the flat. I must have screwed it up and shoved it down the neck of my frock. He had it now.

I snatched it away from him.

"That's just somebody fooling," I said. "It's somebody's idea of a joke, that's all."

He smiled.

"And the telephone was somebody fooling too, was it?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "Will you go to the second drawer of that chest, Jo? I want you to get something out of it for me."

He was steady and calm, not excited at all. I went over to the chest and pulled the drawer open.

"At the left-hand side," he said. "Underneath the shirts."

I lifted the pile of shirts away. I hesitated. It gives you a funny feeling when you suddenly see a revolver. I looked across to Lucky.

"You—you don't want this," I said.

"Pick it up," he said. "It won't hurt you. It's got the catch down."

I still hesitated.

"What do you want it for? What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm not going to do anything with it. But you may need it. Pick it up and bring it over here. Please."

I picked it up, and pointed it carefully away, and carried it over to the bed.

"I don't want it," I said. "I won't need it. I don't know what you mean."

He pointed to a little knob on it.

"That's safe, the way it is now. Pull that catch upwards, away from the butt, and it's ready to fire."

"But . . . what do we want it for, Lucky? We don't want it."

"Put it over on the mantelpiece," he said. "Where you can get it if you need it."

I took it over and laid it down carefully on the mantelpiece. I was glad to leave go of it again.

"I don't want it," I said. "There's nothing I want it for."

"I want you to have it ready," Lucky said, "so that, if necessary, you can do me a big favour. This note they gave you, saying they were coming up here, may be simply to put the wind up us. But they would be quite capable of coming if they felt like it." He spoke quite steadily and calmly, but

now it was almost a wistful note that came into his voice. "There's no need for us to fool each other any more, Jo. You know and I know. We both know the way it is. When it gets like this, quite suddenly there isn't any doubt at all. There isn't any pain, but you suddenly know things for certain. I'm not as frightened as I thought I would be. Now that I've stopped arguing with myself about it, now that I know it for certain, I don't think I'm frightened at all. But it's something that only happens once, and I don't want it interfered with. If they do try to come, Jo, I want you to keep them out. If they pick the lock or force the door, I don't want you to let them come up the stairs. Do anything to stop them. Anything. That's why I want you to have the gun. You might need it for that."

I stood half way between the mantelpiece and the bed, watching him while he spoke. When he finished, I stood there a moment, and then turned and went back to the mantelpiece. I picked the revolver up again. It didn't seem nearly so horrible touching it now. I moved the catch the way he had told me, ready to fire.

"Nobody's coming, Lucky. Nobody's coming near you. I promise."

He smiled.

"Nobody but you," he said.

"Nobody but me."

"Will you lock the door, Jo?"

I went and locked the door of the room, and then sat down by the side of the bed again.

"Don't you want to go to sleep, Lucky? Perhaps you ought to."

"No. Not yet."

"Is there anything I can get you? Anything you'd like?"

"No, thanks."

I smoothed his pillow again, and pushed the hair back off his forehead. He was lying very still now. I fetched a towel and freshened his face and hands. He thanked me, silently, with his eyes. Like a baby.

For quite a long time there was no sound at all in the room. His eyes were closed, and I thought he was asleep. I sat there, watching him, absolutely still for fear of waking him. He suddenly opened his eyes again and smiled.

"You cut yourself a rotten piece of cake, didn't you?"

I shook my head.

"No, Lucky. It was perfect. Everything about it has been perfect."

"No, it wasn't. It was cheap and rotten, all of it. Everything about me was cheap and rotten."

"No, Lucky. Don't talk like that. Please don't. It isn't true. You've been everything I dreamed about."

He turned his head towards me.

"Will you come close to me, Jo?"

"Close to you?" I leaned down to kiss him again. But afterwards he shook his head and looked at me.

"Lie on the bed, Jo."

"I can't, Lucky. I daren't. I'll hurt you. I'll hurt your back."

"No, you won't. You can't hurt it. I can't feel anything there."

I pushed the chair away, and lay very carefully down on the bed beside him. I lifted his left arm gently out of the way.

"Now kiss me."

Our heads were on the pillow, side by side, our faces towards each other. My lips brushed gently over his. They played against his cheek, across his eyes, and up into his hair. And as we lay there, soft and still, we were dancing together again. A careless laugh was ringing in my ears. We walked together, hand in hand, through streets that were gay with flowers.

"There must be something on today!"

"They knew we were coming, darling!"

The sky was blue, the air was soft and warm. We took off our hats and threw them away. We just didn't care. We went on, tireless, over the hills and down into the village. We cupped our hands and drank from the funny old pump. We gave the children pennies. It was one of those days when something tickles you right inside yourself somewhere, and makes you feel mad-gay.

I could feel the warmth of his body through the blankets. His right arm was pulling me, pulling me closer to him.

"Closer! Closer!" he said.

"Don't let me hurt you," I whispered.

"You won't. You can't. Nothing can any more."

Our mouths were pressed together. I felt myself gradually lifted up and carried on a cloud. I shut my eyes and lost myself; I didn't know where we were. I lay there, waiting, helplessly in heaven. It started somewhere, spread right through me, wrapped me up and wafted me away. My hand was underneath his head, pressing his mouth to mine. I didn't want to hurt him. I didn't want to do him any harm. Tighter. Closer. You mustn't do it, you're going

to hurt him. Tighter. Harder. Nothing matters. Nothing matters.

Then suddenly we were still. We lay there, thinking of nothing at all. I don't know how long.

Our heads against each other were suddenly hard and hurting. I stirred myself away. I tried to take my hand from under him. He was heavy on it. I had to pull hard before it would come. His arm that had clasped itself around me, slid idly off me as I moved. I looked at him. I suddenly felt weak and sick and frightened. I looked at his face. His eyes were closed. Across his lips I thought there flickered a fleeting twist of pain. I bent down to kiss them. I couldn't. Not any more.

His eyes came open. They couldn't find me. Yes they could. Just for a moment. They were saying good-bye.

I rolled off the bed and my legs gave way and I lay on the floor. I couldn't think, I couldn't move, I waited for someone to pick me up, but nobody did.

I don't know how long it was. But in the end my legs were cold, and the floor was hard and jagged like a piece of rock. I pushed myself up on my hands, on my knees, on my feet. I stood there, tired, lonely, cold. I looked at his face for a moment, only for a moment, I couldn't look any more. I turned away and wandered towards the door. A black thing on the mantelpiece half reminded me. I went across and looked at it and knew what it was. I picked it up and went out of the room and closed the door behind me.

I went into the sitting-room. The smell of whisky hung across the air. I picked up the note that Doc had scribbled, and scrunched it up and flung it at the hearth. The tablets too. Sleepers. He didn't want them now.

I looked at the telephone. It lay there, as I had left it, the receiver off.

I went into the passage, along to the top of the stairs, revolver in my hand. I sat down on the top stair, resting the barrel on my knee, pointing down at the door. I sat there and waited. Across the silence of the night, the tiny ticking of the clock in his room was all there was.

I sat and waited. Nobody came. The daylight showed under the door and I knew it was morning. I suddenly wondered what I was waiting for. I lay the revolver down on the carpet. I stood up, stiff and aching. I steadied myself against the wall, and went down the stairs, and through the door, and out along the street.

The day had gone. It was late in the evening. Peggy came in.

"You!" she exclaimed.

I made a smile, a twist of the face for her. She looked at me in amazement. Neither of us spoke. At last she said: "Aren't you going to explain yourself, you deserting old so-and-so?"

"I've been away," I said.

Her eyes went round the room.

"You haven't brought your things back?"

I shook my head.

"They got left behind," I said.

I turned more towards her. She peered across at me.

"Phew! Who blacked your eye?"

"I bumped it on the door."

She heard the something in my voice. She gave me one more look, and then deliberately turned her back and walked towards the kitchenette.

"I'm making some tea," she called over her shoulder. "Like some?"

"Please."

She saved me any more questions. She busied herself with getting ready for bed. Just before she got into it, she came across and gave me a quick kiss. Then, as she slid down into bed, she said: "You took my new lipstick with you. You always were a thieving hound!"

"Sorry. I'll buy you a new one."

"You'd better!" She muffled the sheets half over her head, the way she always did. "Good night, Joan."

There wasn't much in her words, but her voice was what I needed.

"Good night."

I slid down into bed, and put my hand across to the bedside lamp and snapped it out. The sudden darkness was like an enemy around me. I lay there, eyes open, looking at nothing, listening at nothing. Fifteen minutes, half an hour perhaps. Peggy was asleep now. She always slept very heavily. It took a lot to wake Peggy. She was sound asleep now. It was all right now. You could lie there, behaving like a kid all night, and nobody would know.

THE END

